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THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES

OF

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

BY

CHARLES DICKENS

VOL. II.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

BOSTON
ESTES & LAURIAT
1890

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NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.

CHAPTER I.

NICHOLAS, ACCOMPANIED BY SMIKE, SALLIES FORTH TO SEEK HIS FORTUNE. — HE ENCOUNTERS MR. VINCENT CRUMMLES; AND WHO HE WAS, IS HEREIN MADE MANIFEST.

THE whole capital which Nicholas found himself entitled to, either in possession, reversion, remainder, or expectancy, after paying his rent and settling with the broker from whom he had hired his poor furniture, did not exceed, by more than a few halfpence, the sum of twenty shillings. And yet he hailed the morning on which he had resolved to quit London, with a light heart, and sprang from his bed with an elasticity of spirit which is happily the lot of young persons, or the world would never be stocked with old ones.

It was a cold, dry, foggy morning in early spring. A few meagre shadows flitted to and fro in the misty streets, and occasionally there loomed through the dull vapor, the heavy outline of some hackney coach wending homewards, which, drawing slowly nearer, rolled jangling by, scattering the thin crust of frost from its whitened roof, and soon was lost

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again in the cloud. At intervals were heard the tread of slipshod feet, and the chilly cry of the poor sweep as he crept, shivering, to his early toil; the heavy footfall of the official watcher of the night, pacing slowly up and down and cursing the tardy hours that still intervened between him and sleep; the rambling of ponderous carts and wagons; the roll of the lighter vehicles which carried buyers and sellers to the different markets; the sound of ineffectual knocking at the doors of heavy sleepers —all these noises fell upon the ear from time to time, but all seemed muffled by the fog, and to be rendered almost as indistinct to the ear as was every object to the sight. The sluggish darkness thickened as the day came on; and those who had the courage to rise and peep at the gloomy street from their curtained windows, crept back to bed again, and coiled themselves up to sleep.

Before even these indications of approaching morning were rife in busy London, Nicholas had made his way alone to the City, and stood beneath the windows of his mother's house. It was dull and bare to see, but it had light and life for him; for there was at least one heart within its old walls to which insult or dishonor would bring the same blood rushing, that flowed in his own veins.

He crossed the road, and raised his eyes to the window of the room where he knew his sister slept. It was closed and dark. "Poor girl," thought Nicholas, "she little thinks who lingers here!"

He looked again, and felt, for the moment, almost vexed that Kate was not there to exchange one word at parting. "Good God!" he thought, suddenly correcting himself, "what a boy I am!"

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"It is better as it is," said Nicholas, after he had lounged on, a few paces, and returned to the same spot. "When I left them before, and could have said good-by a thousand times if I had chosen, I spared them the pain of leave-taking, and why not now?" As he spoke, some fancied motion of the curtain almost persuaded him, for the instant, that Kate was at the window, and by one of those strange contradictions of feeling which are common to us all, he shrunk involuntarily into a doorway, that she might not see him. He smiled at his own weakness; said "God bless them!" and walked away with a lighter step.

Smike was anxiously expecting him when he reached his old lodgings, and so was Newman, who had expended a day's income in a can of rum and milk to prepare them for the journey. They had tied up the luggage, Smike shouldered it, and away they went, with Newman Noggs in company; for he had insisted on walking as far as he could with them, over-night.

"Which way?" asked Newman wistfully.

"To Kingston first," replied Nicholas.

"And where afterwards?" asked Newman. "Why won't you tell me?"

"Because I scarcely know myself, good friend," rejoined Nicholas, laying his hand upon his shoulder; "and if I did, I have neither plan nor prospect yet, and might shift my quarters a hundred times before you could possibly communicate with me."

"I am afraid you have some deep scheme in your head," said Newman doubtfully.

"So deep," replied his young friend, "that even I can't fathom it. Whatever I resolve upon, depend upon it I will write you soon."

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"You won't forget?" said Newman.

"I am not very likely to," rejoined Nicholas. "I have not so many friends that I shall grow confused among the number, and forget my best one."

Occupied in such discourse, they walked on for a couple of hours, as they might have done for a couple of days if Nicholas had not sat himself down on a stone by the wayside, and resolutely declared his intention of not moving another step until Newman Noggs turned back. Having pleaded ineffectually first for another half-mile, and afterwards for another quarter, Newman was fain to comply, and to shape his course towards Golden Square, after interchanging many hearty and affectionate farewells, and many times turning back to wave his hat to the two wayfarers when they had become mere specks in the distance.

"Now listen to me, Smike," said Nicholas, as they trudged with stout hearts onwards. "We are bound for Portsmouth."

Smike nodded his head and smiled, but expressed no other emotion; for whether they had been bound for Portsmouth or Port Royal would have been alike to him, so they had been bound together.

"I don't know much of these matters," resumed Nicholas; "but Portsmouth is a seaport town, and if no other employment is to be obtained, I should think we might get on board some ship. I am young and active, and could be useful in many ways. So could you."

"I hope so," replied Smike. "When I was at that — you know where I mean?"

"Yes, I know," said Nicholas. "You needn't name the place."

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"Well, when I was there," resumed Smike, his eyes sparkling at the prospect of displaying his abilities; "I could milk a cow, and groom a horse, with anybody."

"Ha!" said Nicholas gravely. "I am afraid they don't keep many animals of either kind on board ship, Smike, and even when they have horses, that they are not very particular about rubbing them down; still you can learn to do something else, you know. Where there's a will, there's a way."

"And I am very willing," said Smike, brightening up again.

"God knows you are," rejoined Nicholas; "and if you fail, it shall go hard but I'll do enough for us both."

"Do we go all the way to-day?" asked Smike, after a short silence.

"That would be too severe a trial, even for your willing legs," said Nicholas, with a good-humored smile. "No. Godalming is some thirty and odd miles from London — as I found from a map I borrowed — and I purpose to rest there. We must push on again to-morrow, for we are not rich enough to loiter. Let me relieve you of that bundle! Come!"

"No, no," rejoined Smike, falling back a few steps. "Don't ask me to give it up to you."

"Why not?" asked Nicholas.

"Let me do something for you, at least," said Smike. "You will never let me serve you as I ought. You will never know how I think, day and night, of ways to please you."

"You are a foolish fellow to say it, for I know it well, and see it, or I should be a blind and senseless

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beast," rejoined Nicholas. "Let me ask you a question while I think of it, and there is no one by," he added, looking him steadily in the face. "Have you a good memory?"

"I don't know," said Smike, shaking his head sorrowfully. "I think I had once; but it's all gone now — all gone."

"Why do you think you had once?" asked Nicholas, turning quickly upon him as though the answer in some way helped out the purport of his question.

"Because I could remember, when I was a child," said Smike, "but that is very, very long ago, or at least it seems so. I was always confused and giddy at that place you took me from; and could never remember, and sometimes couldn't even understand, what they said to me. I — let me see — let me see!"

"You are wandering now," said Nicholas, touching him on the arm.

"No," replied his companion, with a vacant look. "I was only thinking how —" He shivered involuntarily as he spoke.

"Think no more of that place, for it is all over," retorted Nicholas, fixing his eyes full upon that of his companion, which was fast settling into an unmeaning stupefied gaze, once habitual to him, and common even then. "What of the first day you went to Yorkshire?"

"Eh!" cried the lad.

"That was before you began to lose your recollection, you know," said Nicholas quietly. "Was the weather hot or cold?"

"Wet," replied the boy. "Very wet. I have

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always said, when it has rained hard, that it was like the night I came: and they used to crowd round and laugh to see me cry when the rain fell heavily. It was like a child, they said, and that made me think of it more. I turned cold all over sometimes, for I could see myself as I was then, coming in at the very same door."

"As you were then," repeated Nicholas, with assumed carelessness; "how was that?"

"Such a little creature," said Smike, "that they might have had pity and mercy upon me, only to remember it."

"You didn't find your way there, alone!" remarked Nicholas.

"No," rejoined Smike, "oh, no."

"Who was with you?"

"A man — a dark, withered man. I have heard them say so, at the school, and I remembered that before. I was glad to leave him, I was afraid of him; but they made me more afraid of them, and used me harder too."

"Look at me," said Nicholas, wishing to attract his full attention. "There; don't turn away. Do you remember no woman, no kind woman, who hung over you once, and kissed your lips, and called you her child?"

"No," said the poor creature, shaking his head, "no, never."

"Nor any house but that house in Yorkshire?"

"No," rejoined the youth, with a melancholy look; "a room — I remember I slept in a room, a large, lonesome room at the top of a house, where there was a trap-door in the ceiling. I have covered my head with the clothes often, not to see it,

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for it frightened me: a young child with no one near at night: and I used to wonder what was on the other side. There was a clock, too, an old clock, in one corner. I remember that. I have never forgotten that room; for when I have terrible dreams, it comes back, just as it was. I see things and people in it that I had never seen then, but there is the room just as it used to be; *that* never changes."

"Will you let me take the bundle now?" asked Nicholas, abruptly changing the theme.

"No," said Smike, "no. Come, let us walk on."

He quickened his pace as he said this, apparently under the impression that they had been standing still during the whole of the previous dialogue. Nicholas marked him closely, and every word of this conversation remained upon his memory.

It was, by this time, within an hour of noon, and although a dense vapor still enveloped the city they had left, as if the very breath of its busy people hung over their schemes of gain and profit, and found greater attraction there than in the quiet region above, in the open country it was clear and fair. Occasionally, in some low spots they came upon patches of mist which the sun had not yet driven from their strongholds; but these were soon passed, and as they labored up the hills beyond, it was pleasant to look down, and see how the sluggish mass rolled heavily off, before the cheering influence of day. A broad, fine, honest sun lighted up the green pastures and dimpled water with the semblance of summer, while it left the travellers all the invigorating freshness of that early time of year. The ground seemed elastic under their feet;

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the sheep-bells were music to their ears; and exhilarated by exercise, and stimulated by hope, they pushed onward with the strength of lions.

The day wore on, and all these bright colors subsided, and assumed a quieter tint, like young hopes softened down by time, or youthful features by degrees resolving into the calm and serenity of age. But they were scarcely less beautiful in their slow decline, than they had been in their prime; for nature gives to every time and season some beauties of its own; and from morning to night, as from the cradle to the grave, is but a succession of changes so gentle and easy, that we can scarcely mark their progress.

To Godalming they came at last, and here they bargained for two humble beds, and slept soundly. In the morning they were astir: though not quite so early as the sun: and again afoot; if not with all the freshness of yesterday, still, with enough of hope and spirit to bear them cheerily on.

It was a harder day's journey than yesterday's, for there were long and weary hills to climb; and in journeys, as in life, it is a great deal easier to go down hill than up. However, they kept on, with unabated perseverance, and the hill has not yet lifted its face to heaven that perseverance will not gain the summit of at last.

They walked upon the rim of the Devil's Punch Bowl; and Smike listened with greedy interest as Nicholas read the inscription upon the stone which, reared upon that wild spot, tells of a murder committed there by night. The grass on which they stood, had once been dyed with gore; and the blood of the murdered man had run down, drop by drop,

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into the hollow which gives the place its name. "The Devil's Bowl," thought Nicholas, as he looked into the void, "never held fitter liquor than that!"

Onward they kept, with steady purpose, and entered at length upon a wide and spacious tract of downs, with every variety of little hill and plain to change their verdant surface. Here, there shot up, almost perpendicularly, into the sky, a height so steep, as to be hardly accessible to any but the sheep and goats that fed upon its sides, and there stood a mound of green, sloping and tapering off so delicately, and merging so gently into the level ground, that you could scarce define its limits. Hills swelling above each other; and undulations shapely and uncouth, smooth and rugged, graceful and grotesque, thrown negligently side by side, bounded the view in each direction; while frequently, with unexpected noise, there uprose from the ground a flight of crows, who, cawing and wheeling round the nearest hills, as if uncertain of their course, suddenly poised themselves upon the wing and skimmed down the long vista of some opening valley, with the speed of light itself.

By degrees, the prospect receded more and more on either hand, and as they had been shut out from rich and extensive scenery, so they emerged once again upon the open country. The knowledge that they were drawing near their place of destination, gave them fresh courage to proceed; but the way had been difficult, and they had loitered on the road, and Smike was tired. Thus, twilight had already closed in, when they turned off the path to the door of a roadside inn, yet twelve miles short of Portsmouth.

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"Twelve miles," said Nicholas, leaning with both hands on his stick, and looking doubtfully at Smike.

"Twelve long miles," repeated the landlord.

"Is it a good road?" inquired Nicholas.

"Very bad," said the landlord. As of course, being a landlord, he would say.

"I want to get on," observed Nicholas, hesitating. "I scarcely know what to do."

"Don't let me influence you," rejoined the landlord. "*I* wouldn't go on if it was me."

"Wouldn't you?" asked Nicholas, with the same uncertainty.

"Not if I knew when I was well off," said the landlord. And having said it he pulled up his apron, put his hands into his pockets, and, taking a step or two outside the door, looked down the dark road with an assumption of great indifference.

A glance at the toil-worn face of Smike determined Nicholas, so without any further consideration he made up his mind to stay where he was.

The landlord led them into the kitchen, and as there was a good fire he remarked that it was very cold. If there had happened to be a bad one he would have observed that it was very warm.

"What can you give us for supper?" was Nicholas's natural question.

"Why — what would you like?" was the landlord's no less natural answer.

Nicholas suggested cold meat, but there was no cold meat — poached eggs, but there were no eggs — mutton chops, but there wasn't a mutton chop within three miles, though there had been more last week than they knew what to do with, and would be an extraordinary supply the day after to-morrow.

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"Then," said Nicholas, "I must leave it entirely to you, as I would have done, at first, if you had allowed me."

"Why, then I'll tell you what," rejoined the landlord. "There's a gentleman in the parlor that's ordered a hot beef-steak pudding and potatoes, at nine. There's more of it than he can manage, and I have very little doubt that if I ask leave, you can sup with him. I'll do that, in a minute."

"No, no," said Nicholas, detaining him. "I would rather not. I — at least — pshaw! why cannot I speak out? Here; you see that I am travelling in a very humble manner, and have made my way hither on foot. It is more than probable, I think, that the gentleman may not relish my company; and although I am the dusty figure you see, I am too proud to thrust myself into his."

"Lord love you," said the landlord, "it's only Mr. Crummles; *he* isn't particular."

"Is he not?" asked Nicholas, on whose mind, to tell the truth, the prospect of the savory pudding was making some impression.

"Not he," replied the landlord. "He'll like your way of talking, I know. But we'll soon see all about that. Just wait a minute."

The landlord hurried into the parlor, without staying for further permission, nor did Nicholas strive to prevent him: wisely considering that supper, under the circumstances, was too serious a matter to be trifled with. It was not long before the host returned, in a condition of much excitement.

"All right," he said in a low voice. "I knew he

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The Country Manager rehearses a Combat.

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would. You'll see something rather worth seeing, in there. Ecod, how they are a-going of it!"

There was no time to inquire to what this exclamation, which was delivered in a very rapturous tone, referred; for he had already thrown open the door of the room; into which Nicholas, followed by Smike with the bundle on his shoulder (he carried it about with him as vigilantly as if it had been a sack of gold), straightway repaired.

Nicholas was prepared for something odd, but not for something quite so odd as the sight he encountered. At the upper end of the room were a couple of boys, one of them very tall and the other very short, both dressed as sailors — or at least as theatrical sailors, with belts, buckles, pigtails, and pistols complete — fighting what is called in play-bills a terrific combat, with two of those short broad-swords with basket hilts which are commonly used at our minor theatres. The short boy had gained a great advantage over the tall boy, who was reduced to mortal strait, and both were overlooked by a large heavy man, perched against the corner of a table, who emphatically adjured them to strike a little more fire out of the swords, and they couldn't fail to bring the house down, on the very first night.

"Mr. Vincent Crummles," said the landlord with an air of great deference. "This is the young gentleman."

Mr. Vincent Crummles received Nicholas with an inclination of the head, something between the courtesy of a Roman emperor and the nod of a pot companion; and bade the landlord shut the door and begone.

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"There's a picture," said Mr. Crummles, motioning Nicholas not to advance and spoil it. "The little 'un has him; if the big 'un doesn't knock under, in three seconds, he's a dead man. Do that again, boys."

The two combatants went to work afresh, and chopped away until the swords emitted a shower of sparks: to the great satisfaction of Mr. Crummles, who appeared to consider this a very great point indeed. The engagement commenced with about two hundred chops administered by the short sailor and the tall sailor alternately, without producing any particular result, until the short sailor was chopped down on one knee; but this was nothing to him, for he worked himself about on the one knee with the assistance of his left hand, and fought most desperately until the tall sailor chopped his sword out of his grasp. Now, the inference was, that the short sailor, reduced to this extremity, would give in at once and cry quarter, but, instead of that, he all of a sudden drew a large pistol from his belt and presented it at the face of the tall sailor, who was so overcome at this (not expecting it) that he let the short sailor pick up his sword and begin again. Then, the chopping recommenced, and a variety of fancy chops were administered on both sides; such as chops dealt with the left hand, and under the leg, and over the right shoulder, and over the left; and when the short sailor made a vigorous cut at the tall sailor's legs, which would have shaved them clean off if it had taken effect, the tall sailor jumped over the short sailor's sword, wherefore to balance the matter, and make it all fair, the tall sailor administered the

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same cut, and the short sailor jumped over *his* sword. After this, there was a good deal of dodging about, and hitching up of the inexpressibles in the absence of braces, and then the short sailor (who was the moral character evidently, for he always had the best of it) made a violent demonstration and closed with the tall sailor, who, after a few unavailing struggles, went down, and expired in great torture as the short sailor put his foot upon his breast, and bored a hole in him through and through.

"That'll be a double *encore* if you take care, boys," said Mr. Crummles. "You had better get your wind now and change your clothes."

Having addressed these words to the combatants, he saluted Nicholas, who then observed that the face of Mr. Crummles was quite proportionate in size to his body; that he had a very full under-lip, a hoarse voice, as though he were in the habit of shouting very much, and very short black hair, shaved off nearly to the crown of his head — to admit (as he afterwards learned) of his more easily wearing character wigs of any shape or pattern.

"What did you think of that, sir?" inquired Mr. Crummles.

"Very good indeed — capital," answered Nicholas.

"You won't see such boys as those very often, I think," said Mr. Crummles.

Nicholas assented — observing, that if they were a little better match —

"Match!" cried Mr. Crummles.

"I mean if they were a little more of a size," said Nicholas, explaining himself.

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"Size!" repeated Mr. Crummles; "why, it's the essence of the combat that there should be a foot or two between them. How are you to get up the sympathies of the audience in a legitimate manner, if there isn't a little man contending against a big one? — unless there's at least five to one, and we haven't hands enough for that business in our company."

"I see," replied Nicholas. "I beg your pardon. That didn't occur to me, I confess."

"It's the main point," said Mr. Crummles. "I open at Portsmouth the day after to-morrow. If you're going there, look into the theatre, and see how that'll tell."

Nicholas promised to do so, if he could, and drawing a chair near the fire, fell into conversation with the manager at once. He was very talkative and communicative, stimulated perhaps, not only by his natural disposition, but by the spirits and water he sipped very plentifully, or the snuff he took in large quantities from a piece of whity-brown paper in his waistcoat pocket. He laid open his affairs without the smallest reserve, and descanted at some length upon the merits of his company, and the acquirements of his family; of both of which, the two broadsword boys formed an honorable portion. There was to be a gathering, it seemed, of the different ladies and gentlemen at Portsmouth on the morrow, whither the father and sons were proceeding (not for the regular season, but in the course of a wandering speculation), after fulfilling an engagement at Guildford with the greatest applause.

"You are going that way?" asked the manager.

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"Ye-yes," said Nicholas. "Yes, I am."

"Do you know the town at all?" inquired the manager, who seemed to consider himself entitled to the same degree of confidence as he had himself exhibited.

"No," replied Nicholas.

"Never there?"

"Never."

Mr. Vincent Crummles gave a short dry cough, as much as to say, "If you won't be communicative, you won't;" and took so many pinches of snuff from the piece of paper, one after another, that Nicholas quite wondered where it all went to.

While he was thus engaged, Mr. Crummles looked, from time to time, with great interest at Smike, with whom he had appeared considerably struck from the first. He had now fallen asleep, and was nodding in his chair.

"Excuse my saying so," said the manager, leaning over to Nicholas, and sinking his voice, "but what a capital countenance your friend has got!"

"Poor fellow!" said Nicholas, with a half-smile, "I wish it were a little more plump, and less haggard."

"Plump!" exclaimed the manager, quite horrified, "you'd spoil it forever."

"Do you think so?"

"Think so, sir! Why, as he is now," said the manager, striking his knee emphatically; "without a pad upon his body, and hardly a touch of paint upon his face, he'd make such an actor for the starved business as was never seen in this country. Only let him be tolerably well up in the Apothecary in Romeo and Juliet, with the slightest possi-

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ble dab of red on the tip of his nose, and he'd be certain of three rounds the moment he put his head out of the practicable door in the front grooves O. P."

"You view him with a professional eye," said Nicholas, laughing.

"And well I may," rejoined the manager. "I never saw a young fellow so regularly cut out for that line, since I've been in the profession. And I played the heavy children when I was eighteen months old."

The appearance of the beef-steak pudding, which came in simultaneously with the junior Vincent Crummleses, turned the conversation to other matters, and indeed, for a time, stopped it altogether. These two young gentlemen wielded their knives and forks with scarcely less address than their broadswords, and as the whole party were quite as sharp set as either class of weapons, there was no time for talking until the supper had been disposed of.

The Master Crummleses had no sooner swallowed the last procurable morsel of food, than they evinced, by various half-suppressed yawns and stretchings of their limbs, an obvious inclination to retire for the night, which Smike had betrayed still more strongly: he having, in the course of the meal, fallen asleep several times while in the very act of eating. Nicholas therefore proposed that they should break up at once, but the manager would by no means hear of it; vowing that he had promised himself the pleasure of inviting his new acquaintance to share a bowl of punch, and that if he declined, he should deem it very unhandsome behavior.

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"Let them go," said Mr. Vincent Crummles, "and we'll have it snugly and cosily together by the fire."

Nicholas was not much disposed to sleep: being in truth too anxious: so, after a little demur, he accepted the offer, and having exchanged a shake of the hand with the young Crummleses, and the manager having on his part bestowed a most affectionate benediction on Smike, he sat himself down opposite to that gentleman by the fireside to assist in emptying the bowl, which soon afterwards appeared, steaming in a manner which was quite exhilarating to behold, and sending forth a most grateful and inviting fragrance.

But, despite the punch and the manager, who told a variety of stories, and smoked tobacco from a pipe, and inhaled it in the shape of snuff, with a most astonishing power, Nicholas was absent and dispirited. His thoughts were in his old home, and when they reverted to his present condition, the uncertainty of the morrow cast a gloom upon him, which his utmost efforts were unable to dispel. His attention wandered; although he heard the manager's voice, he was deaf to what he said; and when Mr. Vincent Crummles concluded the history of some long adventure with a loud laugh, and an inquiry what Nicholas would have done under the same circumstances, he was obliged to make the best apology in his power, and to confess his entire ignorance of all he had been talking about.

"Why, so I saw," observed Mr. Crummles. "You're uneasy in your mind. What's the matter?"

Nicholas could not refrain from smiling at the

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abruptness of the question; but, thinking it scarcely worth while to parry it, owned that he was under some apprehensions lest he might not succeed in the object which had brought him to that part of the country.

"And what's that?" asked the manager.

"Getting something to do which will keep me and my poor fellow-traveller in the common necessaries of life," said Nicholas. "That's the truth. You guessed it long ago, I dare say, so I may as well have the credit of telling it you with a good grace."

"What's to be got to do at Portsmouth more than anywhere else?" asked Mr. Vincent Crummles, melting the sealing-wax on the stem of his pipe in the candle, and rolling it out afresh with his little finger.

"There are many vessels leaving the port, I suppose," replied Nicholas. "I shall try for a berth in some ship or other. There is meat and drink there, at all events."

"Salt meat and new rum; pease-pudding and chaff-biscuits," said the manager, taking a whiff at his pipe to keep it alight, and returning to his work of embellishment.

"One may do worse than that," said Nicholas. "I can rough it, I believe, as well as most young men of my age and previous habits."

"You need be able to," said the manager, "if you go on board ship; but you won't."

"Why not?"

"Because there's not a skipper or mate that would think you worth your salt, when he could get a practised hand," replied the manager; "and they as plentiful there, as the oysters in the streets."

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"What do you mean?" asked Nicholas, alarmed by this prediction, and the confident tone in which it had been uttered. "Men are not born able seamen. They must be reared, I suppose?"

Mr. Vincent Crummles nodded his head. "They must; but not at your age, or from young gentlemen like you."

There was a pause. The countenance of Nicholas fell, and he gazed ruefully at the fire.

"Does no other profession occur to you, which a young man of your figure and address could take up easily, and see the world to advantage in?" asked the manager.

"No," said Nicholas, shaking his head.

"Why, then, I'll tell you one," said Mr. Crummles, throwing his pipe into the fire, and raising his voice. "The stage."

"The stage!" cried Nicholas, in a voice almost as loud.

"The theatrical profession," said Mr. Vincent Crummles. "I am in the theatrical profession myself, my wife is in the theatrical profession, my children are in the theatrical profession. I had a dog that lived and died in it from a puppy; and my chaise-pony goes on, in Timour the Tartar. I'll bring you out, and your friend too. Say the word. I want a novelty."

"I don't know anything about it," rejoined Nicholas, whose breath had been almost taken away by this sudden proposal. "I never acted a part in my life, except at school."

"There's genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh," said Mr. Vincent Crummles.

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"You'll do as well as if you had thought of nothing else but the lamps, from your birth downwards."

Nicholas thought of the small amount of small change that would remain in his pocket after paying the tavern bill: and he hesitated.

"You can be useful to us in a hundred ways," said Mr. Crummles. "Think what capital bills a man of your education could write for the shop-windows."

"Well, I think I could manage that department," said Nicholas.

"To be sure you could," replied Mr. Crummles. "'For further particulars see small hand-bills'—we might have half a volume in every one of 'em. Pieces too; why, you could write us a piece to bring out the whole strength of the company, whenever we wanted one."

"I am not quite so confident about that," replied Nicholas. "But I dare say I could scribble something now and then, that would suit you."

"We'll have a new show-piece out directly," said the manager. "Let me see — peculiar resources of this establishment — new and splendid scenery — you must manage to introduce a real pump and two washing-tubs."

"Into the piece?" said Nicholas.

"Yes," replied the manager. "I bought 'em cheap, at a sale the other day, and they'll come in admirably. That's the London plan. They look up some dresses, and properties, and have a piece written to fit 'em. Most of the theatres keep an author on purpose."

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"Indeed!" cried Nicholas.

"Oh, yes," said the manager; "a common thing. It'll look very well in the bills in separate lines — Real pump! — Splendid tubs! — Great attraction! You don't happen to be anything of an artist, do you?"

"That is not one of my accomplishments," rejoined Nicholas.

"Ah! Then it can't be helped," said the manager. "If you had been, we might have had a large woodcut of the last scene for the posters, showing the whole depth of the stage, with the pump and tubs in the middle; but, however, if you're not, it can't be helped."

"What should I get for all this?" inquired Nicholas, after a few moments' reflection. "Could I live by it?"

"Live by it!" said the manager. "Like a prince! With your own salary, and your friend's, and your writings, you'd make — ah! you'd make a pound a week!"

"You don't say so!"

"I do indeed, and if we had a run of good houses, nearly double the money."

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders; but sheer destitution was before him; and if he could summon fortitude to undergo the extremes of want and hardship, for what had he rescued his helpless charge if it were only to bear as hard a fate as that from which he had wrested him? It was easy to think of seventy miles as nothing, when he was in the same town with the man who had treated him so ill and roused his bitterest thoughts; but now, it seemed far enough. What if he

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went abroad, and his mother or Kate were to die the while?

Without more deliberation, he hastily declared that it was a bargain, and gave Mr. Vincent Crummles his hand upon it.

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CHAPTER II.

TREATS OF THE COMPANY OF MR. VINCENT CRUMMLES, AND OF HIS AFFAIRS, DOMESTIC AND THEATRICAL.

As Mr. Crummles had a strange four-legged animal in the inn stables, which he called a pony, and a vehicle of unknown design, on which he bestowed the appellation of a four-wheeled phaeton, Nicholas proceeded on his journey next morning with greater ease than he had expected: the manager and himself occupying the front seat; and the Master Crummleses and Smike being packed together behind, in company with a wicker basket defended from wet by a stout oilskin, in which were the broadswords, pistols, pigtails, nautical costumes, and other professional necessaries of the aforesaid young gentlemen.

The pony took his time upon the road, and — possibly in consequence of his theatrical education — evinced, every now and then, a strong inclination to lie down. However, Mr. Vincent Crummles kept him up pretty well, by jerking the rein, and plying the whip; and when these means failed, and the animal came to a stand, the elder Master Crummles got out and kicked him. By dint of these encouragements, he was persuaded to move from time to

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time, and they jogged on (as Mr. Crummles truly observed) very comfortably for all parties.

"He's a good pony at bottom," said Mr. Crummles, turning to Nicholas.

He might have been at bottom, but he certainly was not at top, seeing that his coat was of the roughest and most ill-favored kind. So, Nicholas merely observed that he shouldn't wonder if he was.

"Many and many is the circuit this pony has gone," said Mr. Crummles, flicking him skilfully on the eyelid for old acquaintance' sake. "He is quite one of us. His mother was on the stage."

"Was she?" rejoined Nicholas.

"She ate apple-pie at a circus for upwards of fourteen years," said the manager; "fired pistols, and went to bed in a nightcap: and, in short, took the low comedy entirely. His father was a dancer."

"Was he at all distinguished?"

"Not very," said the manager. "He was rather a low sort of pony. The fact is, he had been originally jobbed out by the day, and he never quite got over his old habits. He was clever in melodrama too, but too broad — too broad. When the mother died, he took the port-wine business."

"The port-wine business!" cried Nicholas.

"Drinking port-wine with the clown," said the manager; "but he was greedy, and one night bit off the bowl of the glass, and choked himself, so his vulgarity was the death of him at last."

The descendant of this ill-starred animal requiring increased attention from Mr. Crummles as he progressed in his day's work, that gentleman had very little time for conversation. Nicholas was thus left at leisure to entertain himself with his own thoughts,

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until they arrived at the drawbridge at Portsmouth, when Mr. Crummles pulled up.

"We'll get down here," said the manager, "and the boys will take him round to the stable, and call at my lodgings with the luggage. You had better let yours be taken there for the present."

Thanking Mr. Vincent Crummles for his obliging offer, Nicholas jumped out, and, giving Smike his arm, accompanied the manager up High Street on their way to the theatre; feeling nervous and uncomfortable enough at the prospect of an immediate introduction to a scene so new to him.

They passed a great many bills, pasted against the walls and displayed in windows, wherein the names of Mr. Vincent Crummles, Mrs. Vincent Crummles, Master Crummles, Master P. Crummles, and Miss Crummles, were printed in very large letters, and everything else in very small ones; and, turning at length into an entry, in which was a strong smell of orange-peel and lamp-oil, with an under-current of sawdust, groped their way through a dark passage, and, descending a step or two, threaded a little maze of canvas screens and paint pots, and emerged upon the stage of the Portsmouth Theatre.

"Here we are," said Mr. Crummles.

It was not very light, but Nicholas found himself close to the first entrance on the prompt side, among bare walls, dusty scenes, mildewed clouds, heavily daubed draperies, and dirty floors. He looked about him; ceiling, pit, boxes, gallery, orchestra, fittings, and decorations of every kind, — all looked coarse, cold, gloomy, and wretched.

"Is this a theatre?" whispered Smike in amaze-

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ment; "I thought it was a blaze of light and finery."

"Why, so it is," replied Nicholas, hardly less surprised; "but not by day, Smike — not by day."

The manager's voice recalled him from a more careful inspection of the building, to the opposite side of the proscenium, where, at a small mahogany table with rickety legs and of an oblong shape, sat a stout, portly female, apparently between forty and fifty, in a tarnished silk cloak, with her bonnet dangling by the strings in her hand, and her hair (of which she had a great quantity) braided in a large festoon over each temple.

"Mr. Johnson," said the manager (for Nicholas had given the name which Newman Noggs had bestowed upon him in his conversation with Mrs. Kenwigs), "let me introduce Mrs. Vincent Crummles."

"I am glad to see you, sir," said Mrs. Vincent Crummles, in a sepulchral voice. "I am very glad to see you, and still more happy to hail you as a promising member of our corps."

The lady shook Nicholas by the hand as she addressed him in these terms; he saw it was a large one, but had not expected quite such an iron grip as that with which she honored him.

"And this," said the lady, crossing to Smike, as tragic actresses cross when they obey a stage direction, "and this is the other. You, too, are welcome, sir."

"He'll do, I think, my dear?" said the manager, taking a pinch of snuff.

"He is admirable," replied the lady. "An acquisition, indeed."

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As Mrs. Vincent Crummles recrossed back to the table, there bounded on to the stage from some mysterious inlet, a little girl in a dirty white frock with tucks up to the knees, short trousers, sandalled shoes, white spencer, pink gauze bonnet, green veil and curl papers; who turned a pirouette, cut twice in the air, turned another pirouette, then, looking off at the opposite wing, shrieked, bounded forward to within six inches of the footlights, and fell into a beautiful attitude of terror, as a shabby gentleman in an old pair of buff slippers came in at one powerful slide, and chattering his teeth, fiercely brandished a walking-stick.

"They are going through the Indian Savage and the Maiden," said Mrs. Crummles.

"Oh!" said the manager, "the little ballet interlude. Very good, go on. A little this way, if you please, Mr. Johnson. That'll do. Now!"

The manager clapped his hands as a signal to proceed, and the savage, becoming ferocious, made a slide towards the maiden; but the maiden avoided him in six twirls, and came down, at the end of the last one, upon the very points of her toes. This seemed to make some impression upon the savage; for, after a little more ferocity and chasing of the maiden into corners, he began to relent, and stroked his face several times with his right thumb and four fingers, thereby intimating that he was struck with admiration of the maiden's beauty. Acting upon the impulse of this passion, he (the savage) began to hit himself severe thumps in the chest, and to exhibit other indications of being desperately in love, which, being rather a prosy proceeding, was very likely the cause of the maiden's fall-

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ing asleep; whether it was or no, asleep she did fall, sound as a church, on a sloping bank, and the savage, perceiving it, leaned his left ear on his left hand, and nodded sideways, to intimate to all whom it might concern that she *was* asleep, and no shamming. Being left to himself, the savage had a dance, all alone. Just as he left off, the maiden woke up, rubbed her eyes, got off the bank, and had a dance all alone too — such a dance that the savage looked on in ecstasy all the while, and when it was done, plucked from a neighboring tree some botanical curiosity, resembling a small pickled cabbage, and offered it to the maiden, who at first wouldn't have it, but on the savage shedding tears relented. Then the savage jumped for joy; then the maiden jumped for rapture at the sweet smell of the pickled cabbage. Then the savage and the maiden danced violently together, and, finally, the savage dropped down on one knee, and the maiden stood on one leg upon his other knee; thus concluding the ballet, and leaving the spectators in a state of pleasing uncertainty, whether she would ultimately marry the savage, or return to her friends.

"Very well indeed," said Mr. Crummles; "bravo!"

"Bravo!" cried Nicholas, resolved to make the best of everything. "Beautiful!"

"This, sir," said Mr. Vincent Crummles, bringing the maiden forward, "this is the infant phenomenon — Miss Ninetta Crummles."

"Your daughter?" inquired Nicholas.

"My daughter — my daughter," replied Mr. Vincent Crummles; "the idol of every place we go into, sir. We have had complimentary letters about this girl, sir, from the nobility and gentry of almost every town in England."

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"I am not surprised at that," said Nicholas; "she must be quite a natural genius."

"Quite a —!" Mr. Crummles stopped: language was not powerful enough to describe the infant phenomenon. "I'll tell you what, sir," he said; "the talent of this child is not to be imagined. She must be seen, sir — seen — to be ever so faintly appreciated. There; go to your mother, my dear."

"May I ask how old she is?" inquired Nicholas.

"You may, sir," replied Mr. Crummles, looking steadily in his questioner's face, as some men do when they have doubts about being implicitly believed in what they are going to say. "She is ten years of age, sir."

"Not more!"

"Not a day."

"Dear me!" said Nicholas, "it's extraordinary."

It was; for the infant phenomenon, though of short stature, had a comparatively aged countenance, and had moreover been precisely the same age — not perhaps to the full extent of the memory of the oldest inhabitant, but certainly for five good years. But she had been kept up late every night, and put upon an unlimited allowance of gin and water from infancy to prevent her growing tall, and perhaps this system of training had produced in the infant phenomenon these additional phenomena.

While this short dialogue was going on, the gentleman who had enacted the savage, came up, with his walking shoes on his feet, and his slippers in his hand, to within a few paces, as if desirous to join in the conversation. Deeming this a good opportunity, he put in his word.

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"Talent there, sir!" said the savage, nodding towards Miss Crummles.

Nicholas assented.

"Ah!" said the actor, setting his teeth together, and drawing in his breath with a hissing sound, "she oughtn't to be in the provinces, she oughtn't."

"What do you mean?" asked the manager.

"I mean to say," replied the other warmly, "that she is too good for country boards, and that she ought to be in one of the large houses in London, or nowhere; and I tell you more, without mincing the matter, that if it wasn't for envy and jealousy in some quarter that you know of, she would be. Perhaps you'll introduce me here, Mr. Crummles."

"Mr. Folair," said the manager, presenting him to Nicholas.

"Happy to know you, sir." Mr. Folair touched the brim of his hat with his forefinger, and then shook hands. "A recruit, sir, I understand?"

"An unworthy one," replied Nicholas.

"Did you ever see such a set-out as that?" whispered the actor, drawing him away, as Crummles left them to speak to his wife.

"As what?"

Mr. Folair made a funny face from his pantomime collection, and pointed over his shoulder.

"You don't mean the infant phenomenon?"

"Infant humbug, sir," replied Mr. Folair. "There isn't a female child of common sharpness in a charity school, that couldn't do better than that. She may thank her stars she was born a manager's daughter."

"You seem to take it to heart," observed Nicholas, with a smile.

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"Yes, by Jove, and well I may," said Mr. Folair, drawing his arm through his, and walking him up and down the stage. "Isn't it enough to make a man crusty to see that little sprawler put up in the best business every night, and actually keeping money out of the house, by being forced down the people's throats, while other people are passed over? Isn't it extraordinary to see a man's confounded family conceit blinding him, even to his own interest? Why, I *know* of fifteen and sixpence that came to Southampton one night last month, to see me dance the Highland Fling; and what's the consequence? I've never been put up in it since — never once — while the 'infant phenomenon' has been grinning through artificial flowers at five people and a baby in the pit, and two boys in the gallery, every night."

"If I may judge from what I have seen of you," said Nicholas, "you must be a valuable member of the company."

"Oh!" replied Mr. Folair, beating his slippers together, to knock the dust out; "I *can* come it pretty well — nobody better, perhaps, in my own line — but having such business as one gets here, is like putting lead on one's feet instead of chalk, and dancing in fetters without the credit of it. Holloa, old fellow, how are you?"

The gentleman addressed in these latter words was a dark-complexioned man, inclining indeed to sallow, with long thick black hair, and very evident indications (although he was close shaved) of a stiff beard and whiskers of the same deep shade. His age did not appear to exceed thirty, though many at first sight would have considered him much

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older, as his face was long, and very pale, from the constant application of stage paint. He wore a checked shirt, an old green coat with new gilt buttons, a neckerchief of broad red and green stripes, and full blue trousers; he carried, too, a common ash walking-stick, apparently more for show than use, as he flourished it about, with the hooked end downwards, except when he raised it for a few seconds, and throwing himself into a fencing attitude, made a pass or two at the side-scenes, or at any other object, animate or inanimate, that chanced to afford him a pretty good mark at the moment.

"Well, Tommy," said this gentleman, making a thrust at his friend, who parried it dexterously with his slipper, "what's the news?"

"A new appearance, that's all," replied Mr. Folair, looking at Nicholas.

"Do the honors, Tommy, do the honors," said the other gentleman, tapping him reproachfully on the crown of the hat with his stick.

"This is Mr. Lenville, who does our first tragedy, Mr. Johnson," said the pantomimist.

"Except when old bricks and mortar takes it into his head to do it himself, you should add, Tommy," remarked Mr. Lenville. "You know who bricks and mortar is, I suppose, sir?"

"I do not, indeed," replied Nicholas.

"We call Crummles that, because his style of acting is rather in the heavy and ponderous way," said Mr. Lenville. "I mustn't be cracking jokes, though, for I've got a part of twelve lengths here, which I must be up in to-morrow night, and I haven't had time to look at it yet; I'm a confounded quick study, that's one comfort."

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Consoling himself with this reflection, Mr. Lenville drew from his coat-pocket a greasy and crumpled manuscript, and having made another pass at his friend, proceeded to walk to and fro, conning it to himself and indulging occasionally in such appropriate action as his imagination and the text suggested.

A pretty general muster of the company had by this time taken place; for besides Mr. Lenville and his friend Tommy, there were present a slim young gentleman with weak eyes, who played the low-spirited lovers and sang tenor songs, and who had come arm in arm with the comic countryman — a man with a turned-up nose, large mouth, broad face, and staring eyes. Making himself very amiable to the infant phenomenon, was an inebriated elderly gentleman in the last depths of shabbiness, who played the calm and virtuous old men; and paying especial court to Mrs. Crummles was another elderly gentleman, a shade more respectable, who played the irascible old men — those funny fellows who have nephews in the army and perpetually run about with thick sticks to compel them to marry heiresses. Besides these, there was a roving-looking person in a rough great-coat, who strode up and down in front of the lamps, flourishing a dress cane, and rattling away, in an undertone, with great vivacity for the amusement of an ideal audience. He was not quite so young as he had been, and his figure was rather running to seed; but there was an air of exaggerated gentility about him, which bespoke the hero of swaggering comedy. There was, also, a little group of three or four young men with lantern jaws and thick eyebrows, who were

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conversing in one corner; but they seemed to be of secondary importance, and laughed and talked together without attracting any attention.

The ladies were gathered in a little knot by themselves round the rickety table before mentioned. There was Miss Snevellicci — who could do anything, from a medley dance to Lady Macbeth, and also always played some part in blue silk kneesmalls at her benefit — glancing, from the depths of her coal-scuttle straw bonnet, at Nicholas, and affecting to be absorbed in the recital of a diverting story to her friend Miss Ledrook, who had brought her work, and was making up a ruff in the most natural manner possible. There was Miss Belvawney — who seldom aspired to speaking parts, and usually went on as a page in white silk hose, to stand with one leg bent, and contemplate the audience, or to go in and out after Mr. Crummles in stately tragedy — twisting up the ringlets of the beautiful Miss Bravassa, who had once had her likeness taken "in character" by an engraver's apprentice, whereof impressions were hung up for sale in the pastrycook's window, and the greengrocer's, and at the circulating library, and the box-office, whenever the announce bills came out for her annual night. There was Mrs. Lenville, in a very limp bonnet and veil, decidedly in that way in which she would wish to be if she truly loved Mr. Lenville; there was Miss Gazingi, within an imitation ermine boa tied in a loose knot round her neck, flogging Mr. Crummles, junior, with both ends, in fun. Lastly, there was Mrs. Grudden in a brown cloth pelisse and a beaver bonnet, who assisted Mrs. Crummles in her domestic affairs, and took money at the doors, and dressed

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the ladies, and swept the house, and held the prompt book when everybody else was on for the last scene, and acted any kind of part on any emergency without ever learning it, and was put down in the bills under any name or names whatever, that occurred to Mr. Crummles as looking well in print.

Mr. Folair, having obligingly confided these particulars to Nicholas, left him to mingle with his fellows; the work of personal introduction was completed by Mr. Vincent Crummles, who publicly heralded the new actor as a prodigy of genius and learning.

"I beg your pardon," said Miss Snevellicci, sidling towards Nicholas, "but did you ever play at Canterbury?"

"I never did," replied Nicholas.

"I recollect meeting a gentleman at Canterbury," said Miss Snevellicci, "only for a few moments, for I was leaving the company as he joined it, so like you that I felt almost certain it was the same."

"I see you now for the first time," rejoined Nicholas with all due gallantry. "I am sure I never saw you before; I couldn't have forgotten it."

"Oh, I'm sure — it's very flattering of you to say so," retorted Miss Snevellicci with a graceful bend. "Now I look at you again, I see that the gentleman at Canterbury hadn't the same eyes as you — you'll think me very foolish for taking notice of such things, won't you?"

"Not at all," said Nicholas. "How can I feel otherwise than flattered by your notice in any way?"

"Oh! you men are such vain creatures!" cried Miss Snevellicci. Whereupon, she became charm-

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ingly confused, and, pulling out her pocket-handkerchief from a faded pink silk reticule with a gilt clasp, called to Miss Ledrook —

"Led, my dear," said Miss Snevellicci.

"Well, what is the matter?" said Miss Ledrook.

"It's not the same."

"Not the same what?"

"Canterbury — you know what I mean. Come here! I want to speak to you."

But Miss Ledrook wouldn't come to Miss Snevellicci, so Miss Snevellicci was obliged to go to Miss Ledrook, which she did, in a skipping manner that was quite fascinating; and Miss Ledrook evidently joked Miss Snevellicci about being struck with Nicholas; for, after some playful whispering, Miss Snevellicci hit Miss Ledrook very hard on the backs of her hands, and retired up, in a state of pleasing confusion.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Vincent Crummles, who had been writing on a piece of paper, "we'll call the Mortal Struggle to-morrow at ten; everybody for the procession. Intrigue, and Ways and Means, you're all up in, so we shall only want one rehearsal. Everybody at ten, if you please."

"Everybody at ten," repeated Mrs. Grudden, looking about her.

"On Monday morning we shall read a new piece," said Mr. Crummles; "the name's not known yet, but everybody will have a good part. Mr. Johnson will take care of that."

"Hallo!" said Nicholas, starting. "I —"

"On Monday morning," repeated Mr. Crummles, raising his voice, to drown the unfortunate Mr.

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Johnson's remonstrance; "that'll do, ladies and gentlemen."

The ladies and gentlemen required no second notice to quit; and, in a few minutes, the theatre was deserted, save by the Crummles family, Nicholas, and Smike.

"Upon my word," said Nicholas, taking the manager aside, "I don't think I can be ready by Monday."

"Pooh, pooh," replied Mr. Crummles.

"But really I can't," returned Nicholas; "my invention is not accustomed to these demands, or possibly I might produce —"

"Invention! what the devil's that got to do with it!" cried the manager hastily.

"Everything, my dear sir."

"Nothing, my dear sir," retorted the manager, with evident impatience. "Do you understand French?"

"Perfectly well."

"Very good," said the manager, opening the table drawer, and giving a roll of paper from it to Nicholas. "There! Just turn that into English, and put your name on the title-page. Damn me," said Mr. Crummles angrily, "if I haven't often said that I wouldn't have a man or woman in my company that wasn't master of the language, so that they might learn it from the original, and play it in English, and save all this trouble and expense."

Nicholas smiled and pocketed the play.

"What are you going to do about your lodgings?" said Mr. Crummles.

Nicholas could not help thinking that, for the first week, it would be an uncommon convenience

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to have a turn-up bedstead in the pit, but he merely remarked that he had not turned his thoughts that way.

"Come home with me, then," said Mr. Crummles, "and my boys shall go with you after dinner, and show you the most likely place."

The offer was not to be refused; Nicholas and Mr. Crummles gave Mrs. Crummles an arm each, and walked up the street in stately array. Smike, the boys, and the phenomenon, went home by a shorter cut, and Mrs. Grudden remained behind to take some cold Irish stew and a pint of porter in the box-office.

Mrs. Crummles trod the pavement as if she were going to immediate execution with an animating consciousness of innocence, and that heroic fortitude which virtue alone inspires. Mr. Crummles, on the other hand, assumed the look and gait of a hardened despot; but they both attracted some notice from many of the passers-by, and when they heard a whisper of "Mr. and Mrs. Crummles!" or saw a little boy run back to stare them in the face, the severe expression of their countenances relaxed, for they felt it was popularity.

Mr. Crummles lived in St. Thomas's Street, at the house of one Bulph, a pilot, who sported a boat-green door, with window-frames of the same color, and had the little finger of a drowned man on his parlor mantel-shelf, with other maritime and natural curiosities. He displayed also a brass knocker, a brass plate, and a brass bell-handle, all very bright and shining; and had a mast, with a vane on the top of it, in his back-yard.

"You are welcome," said Mrs. Crummles, turning

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round to Nicholas when they reached the bow-windowed front room on the first floor.

Nicholas bowed his acknowledgments, and was unfeignedly glad to see the cloth laid.

"We have but a shoulder of mutton with onion sauce," said Mrs. Crummles, in the same charnel-house voice; "but such as our dinner is, we beg you to partake of it."

"You are very good," replied Nicholas, "I shall do it ample justice."

"Vincent," said Mrs. Crummles, "what is the hour?"

"Five minutes past dinner-time," said Mr. Crummles.

Mrs. Crummles rang the bell. "Let the mutton and onion sauce appear."

The slave who attended upon Mr. Bulph's lodgers, disappeared, and after a short interval reappeared with the festive banquet. Nicholas and the infant phenomenon opposed each other at the pembroke-table, and Smike and the Master Crummleses dined on the sofa bedstead.

"Are they very theatrical people here?" asked Nicholas.

"No," replied Mr. Crummles, shaking his head, "far from it — far from it."

"I pity them," observed Mrs. Crummles.

"So do I," said Nicholas; "if they have no relish for theatrical entertainments, properly conducted."

"Then they have none, sir," rejoined Mr. Crummles. "To the infant's benefit, last year, on which occasion she repeated three of her most popular characters, and also appeared in the Fairy

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Porcupine, as originally performed by her, there was a house of no more than four pound twelve."

"Is it possible?" cried Nicholas.

"And two pound of that was trust, pa," said the phenomenon.

"And two pound of that was trust," repeated Mr. Crummles. "Mrs. Crummles herself has played to mere handfuls."

"But they are always a taking audience, Vincent," said the manager's wife.

"Most audiences are, when they have good acting — real good acting — the regular thing," replied Mr. Crummles forcibly.

"Do you give lessons, ma'am?" inquired Nicholas.

"I do," said Mrs. Crummles.

"There is no teaching here, I suppose?"

"There has been," said Mrs. Crummles. "I have received pupils here. I imparted tuition to the daughter of a dealer in ships' provision; but it afterwards appeared that she was insane when she first came to me. It was very extraordinary that she should come, under such circumstances."

Not feeling quite so sure of that, Nicholas thought it best to hold his peace.

"Let me see," said the manager, cogitating after dinner. "Would you like some nice little part with the infant?"

"You are very good," replied Nicholas hastily; "but I think perhaps it would be better if I had somebody of my own size at first, in case I should turn out awkward. I should feel more at home, perhaps."

"True," said the manager. "Perhaps you would. And you could play up to the infant, in time, you know."

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"Certainly," replied Nicholas: devoutly hoping that it would be a very long time before he was honored with this distinction.

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do," said Mr. Crummles. "You shall study Romeo when you've done that piece — don't forget to throw the pump and tubs in by the by — Juliet Miss Snevellicci, old Grudden the nurse. — Yes, that'll do very well. Rover, too; — you might get up Rover while you were about it, and Cassio, and Jeremy Diddler. You can easily knock them off; one part helps the other so much. Here they are, cues and all."

With these hasty general directions Mr. Crummles thrust a number of little books into the faltering hands of Nicholas, and bidding his eldest son go with him and show where lodgings were to be had, shook him by the hand, and wished him good-night.

There is no lack of comfortable furnished apartments in Portsmouth, and no difficulty in finding some that are proportionate to very slender finances; but the former were too good, and the latter too bad, and they went into so many houses, and came out unsuited, that Nicholas seriously began to think he should be obliged to ask permission to spend the night in the theatre, after all.

Eventually, however, they stumbled upon two small rooms up three pair of stairs, or rather two pair and a ladder, at a tobacconist's shop, on the Common Hard: a dirty street leading down to the dockyard. These Nicholas engaged, only too happy to have escaped any request for payment of a week's rent beforehand.

"There! Lay down our personal property, Smike,"

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he said, after showing young Crummles downstairs. "We have fallen upon strange times, and Heaven only knows the end of them; but I am tired with the events of these three days, and will postpone reflection till to-morrow — if I can."

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CHAPTER III.

OF THE GREAT BESPEAK FOR MISS SNEVELLICCI, AND THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF NICHOLAS UPON ANY STAGE.

NICHOLAS was up betimes in the morning; but he had scarcely begun to dress, notwithstanding, when he heard footsteps ascending the stairs, and was presently saluted by the voices of Mr. Folair, the pantomimist, and Mr. Lenville, the tragedian.

"House, house, house!" cried Mr. Folair.

"What, ho! within there!" said Mr. Lenville, in a deep voice.

"Confound these fellows!" thought Nicholas; "they have come to breakfast, I suppose. I'll open the door directly, if you'll wait an instant."

The gentlemen entreated him not to hurry himself; and, to beguile the interval, had a fencing bout with their walking-sticks on the very small landing-place: to the unspeakable discomposure of all the other lodgers downstairs.

"Here, come in," said Nicholas, when he had completed his toilet. "In the name of all that's horrible, don't make that noise outside."

"An uncommon snug little box this," said Mr. Lenville, stepping into the front room, and taking

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his hat off, before he could get in at all. "Pernicious snug."

"For a man at all particular in such matters, it might be a trifle too snug," said Nicholas; "for, although it is, undoubtedly, a great convenience to be able to reach anything you want from the ceiling or the floor, or either side of the room, without having to move from your chair, still these advantages can only be had in an apartment of the most limited size."

"It isn't a bit too confined for a single man," returned Mr. Lenville. "That reminds me, — my wife, Mr. Johnson, — I hope she'll have some good part in this piece of yours?"

"I glanced at the French copy last night," said Nicholas. "It looks very good, I think."

"What do you mean to do for me, old fellow?" asked Mr. Lenville, poking the struggling fire with his walking-stick, and afterwards wiping it on the skirt of his coat. "Anything in the gruff and grumble way?"

"You turn your wife and child out of doors," said Nicholas; "and, in a fit of rage and jealousy, stab your eldest son in the library."

"Do I, though!" exclaimed Mr. Lenville. "That's very good business."

"After which," said Nicholas, "you are troubled with remorse till the last act, and then you make up your mind to destroy yourself. But, just as you are raising the pistol to your head, a clock strikes — ten."

"I see," cried Mr. Lenville. "Very good."

"You pause," said Nicholas; "you recollect to have heard a clock strike ten in your infancy. The

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pistol falls from your hand — you are overcome — you burst into tears, and become a virtuous and exemplary character forever afterwards."

"Capital!" said Mr. Lenville: "that's a sure card, a sure card. Get the curtain down with a touch of nature like that, and it'll be a triumphant success."

"Is there anything good for me?" inquired Mr. Folair anxiously.

"Let me see," said Nicholas. "You play the faithful and attached servant; you are turned out of doors with the wife and child."

"Always coupled with that infernal phenomenon," sighed Mr. Folair; "and we go into poor lodgings, where I won't take any wages, and talk sentiment, I suppose?"

"Why — yes," replied Nicholas: "that is the course of the piece."

"I must have a dance of some kind, you know," said Mr. Folair. "You'll have to introduce one for the phenomenon, so you'd better make a *pas de deux*, and save time."

"There's nothing easier than that," said Mr. Lenville, observing the disturbed looks of the young dramatist.

"Upon my word I don't see how it's to be done," rejoined Nicholas.

"Why, isn't it obvious?" reasoned Mr. Lenville. "Gadzooks, who can help seeing the way to do it? — you astonish me! You get the distressed lady, and the little child, and the attached servant, into the poor lodgings, don't you? — Well, look here. The distressed lady sinks into a chair, and buries her face in her pocket-handkerchief. 'What makes you weep, mamma?' says the child. 'Don't weep,

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mamma, or you'll make me weep too!'—'And me!' says the favorite servant, rubbing his eyes with his arm. 'What can we do to raise your spirits, dear mamma?' says the little child. 'Ay, what *can* we do?' says the faithful servant. 'Oh, Pierre!' says the distressed lady; 'would that I could shake off these painful thoughts.'—'Try, ma'am, try,' says the faithful servant; 'rouse yourself, ma'am; be amused.'—'I will,' says the lady, 'I will learn to suffer with fortitude. Do you remember that dance, my honest friend, which, in happier days, you practised with this sweet angel? It never failed to calm my spirits then. Oh! let me see it once again before I die!'—There it is—cue for the band, *before I die*,—and off they go. That's the regular thing; isn't it, Tommy?"

"That's it," replied Mr. Folair. "The distressed lady, overpowered by old recollections, faints at the end of the dance, and you close in with a picture."

Profiting by these and other lessons, which were the result of the personal experience of the two actors, Nicholas willingly gave them the best breakfast he could, and, when he at length got rid of them, applied himself to his task: by no means displeased to find that it was so much easier than he had at first supposed. He worked very hard all day, and did not leave his room until the evening, when he went down to the theatre, whither Smike had repaired before him to go on with another gentleman as a general rebellion.

Here all the people were so much changed, that he scarcely knew them. False hair, false color, false calves, false muscles—they had become different beings. Mr. Lenville was a blooming warrior

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of most exquisite proportions; Mr. Crummles, his large face shaded by a profusion of black hair, a Highland outlaw of most majestic bearing; one of the old gentlemen a jailer, and the other a venerable patriarch; the comic countryman, a fighting-man of great valor, relieved by a touch of humor; each of the Master Crummleses a prince in his own right; and the low-spirited lover, a desponding captive. There was a gorgeous banquet ready spread for the third act, consisting of two pasteboard vases, one plate of biscuits, a black bottle, and a vinegar cruet; and, in short, everything was on a scale of the utmost splendor and preparation.

Nicholas was standing with his back to the curtain, now contemplating the first scene, which was a Gothic archway, about two feet shorter than Mr. Crummles, through which that gentleman was to make his first entrance, and now listening to a couple of people who were cracking nuts in the gallery, wondering whether they made the whole audience, when the manager himself walked familiarly up and accosted him.

"Been in front to-night?" said Mr. Crummles.

"No," replied Nicholas, "not yet. I am going to see the play."

"We've had a pretty good Let," said Mr. Crummles. "Four front places in the centre, and the whole of the stage-box."

"Oh, indeed!" said Nicholas; "a family, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Crummles, "yes. It's an affecting thing. There are six children, and they never come unless the phenomenon plays."

It would have been difficult for any party, family,

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or otherwise, to have visited the theatre on a night when the phenomenon did *not* play, inasmuch as she always sustained one, and not uncommonly two or three, characters, every night; but Nicholas, sympathizing with the feelings of a father, refrained from hinting at this trifling circumstance, and Mr. Crummles continued to talk, uninterrupted by him.

"Six," said that gentleman; "pa and ma eight, aunt nine, governess ten, grandfather and grandmother twelve. Then, there's the footman, who stands outside, with a bag of oranges and a jug of toast and water, and sees the play for nothing through the little pane of glass in the box-door — it's cheap at a guinea; they gain by taking a box."

"I wonder you allow so many," observed Nicholas.

"There's no help for it," replied Mr. Crummles; "it's always expected in the country. If there are six children, six people come to hold them in their laps. A family-box carries double always. Ring in the orchestra, Grudden!"

That useful lady did as she was requested, and shortly afterwards the tuning of three fiddles was heard. Which process having been protracted as long as it was supposed that the patience of the audience could possibly bear it, was put a stop to by another jerk of the bell, which, being the signal to begin in earnest, set the orchestra playing a variety of popular airs, with involuntary variations.

If Nicholas had been astonished at the alteration for the better which the gentlemen displayed, the transformation of the ladies was still more extraordinary. When, from a snug corner of the manager's box, he beheld Miss Snevellicci in all the glories of

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white muslin with a golden hem, and Mrs. Crummles in all the dignity of the outlaw's wife, and Miss Bravassa in all the sweetness of Miss Snevellicci's confidential friend, and Miss Belvawney in the white silks of a page doing duty everywhere and swearing to live and die in the service of everybody, he could scarcely contain his admiration, which testified itself in great applause, and the closest possible attention to the business of the scene. The plot was most interesting. It belonged to no particular age, people, or country, and was perhaps the more delightful on that account, as nobody's previous information could afford the remotest glimmering of what would ever come of it. An outlaw had been very successful in doing something somewhere, and came home, in triumph, to the sound of shouts and fiddles, to greet his wife — a lady of masculine mind, who talked a good deal about her father's bones, which it seemed were unburied, though whether from a peculiar taste on the part of the old gentleman himself, or the reprehensible neglect of his relations, did not appear. This outlaw's wife was, somehow or other, mixed up with a patriarch, living in a castle a long way off, and this patriarch was the father of several of the characters, but he didn't exactly know which, and was uncertain whether he had brought up the right ones in his castle, or the wrong ones; he rather inclined to the latter opinion, and, being uneasy, relieved his mind with a banquet, during which solemnity somebody in a cloak said "Beware!" which somebody was known by nobody (except the audience) to be the outlaw himself, who had come there, for reasons unexplained, but pos-

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sibly with an eye to the spoons. There was an agreeable little surprise in the way of certain love passages between the desponding captive and Miss Snevellicci, and the comic fighting-man and Miss Bravassa; besides which, Mr. Lenville had several very tragic scenes in the dark, while on throat-cutting expeditions, which were all baffled by the skill and bravery of the comic fighting-man (who overheard whatever was said all through the piece) and the intrepidity of Miss Snevellicci, who adopted tights, and therein repaired to the prison of her captive lover, with a small basket of refreshments and a dark lantern. At last, it came out that the patriarch was the man who had treated the bones of the outlaw's father-in-law with so much disrespect, for which cause and reason the outlaw's wife repaired to his castle to kill him, and so got into a dark room, where, after a good deal of groping in the dark, everybody got hold of everybody else, and took them for somebody besides, which occasioned a vast quantity of confusion, with some pistolling, loss of life, and torchlight; after which, the patriarch came forward, and observing, with a knowing look, that he knew all about his children now, and would tell them when they got inside, said that there could not be a more appropriate occasion for marrying the young people than that; and therefore he joined their hands, with the full consent of the indefatigable page, who (being the only other person surviving) pointed with his cap into the clouds, and his right hand to the ground; thereby invoking a blessing and giving the cue for the curtain to come down, which it did, amidst general applause.

"What did you think of that?" asked Mr.

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Crummles, when Nicholas went round to the stage again. Mr. Crummles was very red and hot, for your outlaws are desperate fellows to shout.

"I think it was very capital indeed," replied Nicholas; "Miss Snevellicci in particular was uncommonly good."

"She's a genius," said Mr. Crummles; "quite a genius, that girl. By the by, I've been thinking of bringing out that piece of yours on her bespeak night."

"When?" asked Nicholas.

"The night of her bespeak. Her benefit night, when her friends and patrons bespeak the play," said Mr. Crummles.

"Oh! I understand," replied Nicholas.

"You see," said Mr. Crummles, "it's sure to go, on such an occasion, and even if it should not work up quite as well as we expect, why, it will be her risk, you know, and not ours."

"Yours, you mean," said Nicholas.

"I said mine, didn't I?" returned Mr. Crummles. "Next Monday week. What do you say? You'll have done it, and are sure to be up in the lover's part, long before that time."

"I don't know about 'long before,'" replied Nicholas; "but *by* that time I think I can undertake to be ready."

"Very good," pursued Mr. Crummles, "then we'll call that settled. Now, I want to ask you something else. There's a little — what shall I call it? — a little canvassing takes place on these occasions."

"Among the patrons, I suppose?" said Nicholas.

"Among the patrons; and the fact is, that

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Snevellicci has had so many bespeaks in this place, that she wants an attraction. She had a bespeak when her mother-in-law died, and a bespeak when her uncle died; and Mrs. Crummles and myself have had bespeaks on the anniversary of the phenomenon's birthday, and our wedding-day, and occasions of that description, so that, in fact, there's some difficulty in getting a good one. Now, won't you help this poor girl, Mr. Johnson?" said Crummles, sitting himself down on a drum, and taking a great pinch of snuff, as he looked him steadily in the face.

"How do you mean?" rejoined Nicholas.

"Don't you think you could spare half an hour to-morrow morning, to call with her at the houses of one or two of the principal people?" murmured the manager in a persuasive tone.

"Oh, dear me," said Nicholas, with an air of very strong objection, "I shouldn't like to do that."

"The infant will accompany her," said Mr. Crummles. "The moment it was suggested to me, I gave permission for the infant to go. There will not be the smallest impropriety — Miss Snevellicci, sir, is the very soul of honor. It would be of material service — the gentleman from London — author of the new piece — actor in the new piece — first appearance on any boards — it would lead to a great bespeak, Mr. Johnson."

"I am very sorry to throw a damp upon the prospects of anybody, and more especially a lady," replied Nicholas; "but really I must decidedly object to making one of the canvassing party."

"What does Mr. Johnson say, Vincent?" inquired a voice close to his ear; and, looking round,

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he found Mrs. Crummles and Miss Snevellicci herself standing behind him.

"He has some objection, my dear," replied Mr. Crummles, looking at Nicholas.

"Objection!" exclaimed Mrs. Crummles. "Can it be possible?"

"Oh, I hope not!" cried Miss Snevellicci. "You surely are not so cruel — oh, dear me! — Well, I — to think of that now, after all one's looking forward to it!"

"Mr. Johnson will not persist, my dear," said Mrs. Crummles. "Think better of him than to suppose it. Gallantry, humanity, all the best feelings of his nature, must be enlisted in this interesting cause."

"Which moves even a manager," said Mr. Crummles, smiling.

"And a manager's wife," added Mrs. Crummles, in her accustomed tragedy tones. "Come, come, you will relent, I know you will."

"It is not in my nature," said Nicholas, moved by these appeals, "to resist any entreaty, unless it is to do something positively wrong; and, beyond a feeling of pride, I know nothing which should prevent my doing this. I know nobody here, and nobody knows me. So be it then. I yield."

Miss Snevellicci was at once overwhelmed with blushes and expressions of gratitude, of which latter commodity neither Mr. nor Mrs. Crummles was by any means sparing. It was arranged that Nicholas should call upon her, at her lodgings, at eleven next morning, and soon after they parted: he to return home to his authorship: Miss Snevellicci to dress for the after-piece: and the dis-

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interested manager and his wife to discuss the probable gains of the forthcoming bespeak, of which they were to have two-thirds of the profits by solemn treaty of agreement.

At the stipulated hour next morning, Nicholas repaired to the lodgings of Miss Snevellicci, which were in a place called Lombard Street, at the house of a tailor. A strong smell of ironing pervaded the little passage; and the tailor's daughter, who opened the door, appeared in that flutter of spirits which is so often attendant upon the periodical getting-up of a family's linen.

"Miss Snevellicci lives here, I believe?" said Nicholas, when the door was opened.

The tailor's daughter replied in the affirmative.

"Will you have the goodness to let her know that Mr. Johnson is here?" said Nicholas.

"Oh, if you please, you're to come upstairs," replied the tailor's daughter, with a smile.

Nicholas followed the young lady, and was shown into a small apartment on the first floor, communicating with a back-room: in which, as he judged from a certain half-subdued clinking sound, as of cups and saucers, Miss Snevellicci was then taking her breakfast in bed.

"You're to wait, if you please," said the tailor's daughter, after a short period of absence, during which the clinking in the back-room had ceased, and been succeeded by whispering — "She won't be long."

As she spoke, she pulled up the window-blind, and having by this means (as she thought) diverted Mr. Johnson's attention from the room to the street, caught up some articles which were airing on the

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fender, and had very much the appearance of stockings, and darted off.

As there were not many objects of interest outside the window, Nicholas looked about the room with more curiosity than he might otherwise have bestowed upon it. On the sofa lay an old guitar, several thumbed pieces of music, and a scattered litter of curl-papers: together with a confused heap of play-bills, and a pair of soiled white satin shoes with large blue rosettes. Hanging over the back of a chair was a half-finished muslin apron with little pockets ornamented with red ribbons, such as waiting-women wear on the stage, and (by consequence) are never seen with anywhere else. In one corner stood the diminutive pair of top-boots in which Miss Snevellicci was accustomed to enact the little jockey, and folded on a chair hard by was a small parcel, which bore a very suspicious resemblance to the companion smalls.

But the most interesting object of all was, perhaps, the open scrap-book, displayed in the midst of some theatrical duodecimos that were strewn upon the table; and pasted into which scrap-book were various critical notices of Miss Snevellicci's acting, extracted from different provincial journals, together with one poetic address in her honor, commencing, —

> Sing, God of Love, and tell me in what dearth
> Thrice-gifted SNEVELLICCI came on earth,
> To thrill us with her smile, her tear, her eye,
> Sing, God of Love, and tell me quickly why.

Besides this effusion, there were innumerable complimentary allusions, also extracted from newspa-

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pers, such as: "We observe from an advertisement in another part of our paper of to-day, that the charming and highly talented Miss Snevellicci takes her benefit on Wednesday, for which occasion she has put forth a bill of fare that might kindle exhilaration in the breast of a misanthrope. In the confidence that our fellow-townsmen have not lost that high appreciation of public utility and private worth, for which they have long been so pre-eminently distinguished, we predict that this charming actress will be greeted with a bumper." "To Correspondents. — J. S. is misinformed when he supposes that the highly gifted and beautiful Miss Snevellicci, nightly captivating all hearts at our pretty and commodious little theatre, is *not* the same lady to whom the young gentleman of immense fortune, residing within a hundred miles of the good city of York, lately made honorable proposals. We have reason to know that Miss Snevellicci *is* the lady who was implicated in that mysterious and romantic affair, and whose conduct on that occasion did no less honor to her head and heart, than do her histrionic triumphs to her brilliant genius." A copious assortment of such paragraphs as these, with long bills of benefits all ending with "Come Early," in large capitals, formed the principal contents of Miss Snevellicci's scrap-book.

Nicholas had read a great many of these scraps, and was absorbed in a circumstantial and melancholy account of the train of events which had led to Miss Snevellicci's spraining her ankle by slipping on a piece of orange-peel flung by a monster in human form (so the paper said), upon the stage at Winchester, — when that young lady herself, attired

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in the coal-scuttle bonnet and walking-dress complete, tripped into the room, with a thousand apologies for having detained him so long after the appointed time.

"But really," said Miss Snevellicci, "my darling Led, who lives with me here, was taken so very ill in the night that I thought she would have expired in my arms."

"Such a fate is almost to be envied," returned Nicholas, "but I am very sorry to hear it nevertheless."

"What a creature you are to flatter!" said Miss Snevellicci, buttoning her glove in much confusion.

"If it be flattery to admire your charms and accomplishments," rejoined Nicholas, laying his hand upon the scrap-book, "you have better specimens of it here."

"Oh, you cruel creature, to read such things as those! I'm almost ashamed to look you in the face afterwards, positively I am," said Miss Snevellicci, seizing the book and putting it away in a closet. "How careless of Led! How could she be so naughty!"

"I thought you had kindly left it here, on purpose for me to read," said Nicholas. And really it did seem possible.

"I wouldn't have had you see it for the world!" rejoined Miss Snevellicci. "I never was so vexed — never! But she is such a careless thing, there's no trusting her."

The conversation was here interrupted by the entrance of the phenomenon, who had discreetly remained in the bedroom up to this moment, and now presented herself, with much grace and light-

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ness, bearing in her hand a very little green parasol with a broad fringe border, and no handle. After a few words of course, they sallied into the street.

The phenomenon was rather a troublesome companion, for first the right sandal came down, and then the left, and these mischances being repaired, one leg of the little white trousers was discovered to be longer than the other; besides these accidents, the green parasol was dropped down an iron grating, and only fished up again with great difficulty and by dint of much exertion. However, it was impossible to scold her, as she was the manager's daughter, so Nicholas took it all in perfect good-humor, and walked on, with Miss Snevellicci, arm in arm on one side, and the offending infant on the other.

The first house to which they bent their steps, was situated in a terrace of respectable appearance. Miss Snevellicci's modest double knock was answered by a footboy, who, in reply to her inquiry whether Mrs. Curdle was at home, opened his eyes very wide, grinned very much, and said he didn't know, but he'd inquire. With this he showed them into a parlor where he kept them waiting, until the two women-servants had repaired thither, under false pretences, to see the play-actors; and having compared notes with them in the passage, and joined in a vast quantity of whispering and giggling, he at length went upstairs with Miss Snevellicci's name.

Now, Mrs. Curdle was supposed, by those who were best informed on such points, to possess quite the London taste in matters relating to literature and the drama; and as to Mr. Curdle, he had written a pamphlet of sixty-four pages, post octavo, on the character of the Nurse's deceased husband in Romeo

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and Juliet, with an inquiry whether he really had been a "merry man" in his lifetime, or whether it was merely his widow's affectionate partiality that induced her so to report him. He had likewise proved, that by altering the received mode of punctuation, any one of Shakspeare's plays could be made quite different, and the sense completely changed; it is needless to say, therefore, that he was a great critic, and a very profound and most original thinker.

"Well, Miss Snevellicci," said Mrs. Curdle, entering the parlor, "and how do *you* do?"

Miss Snevellicci made a graceful obeisance, and hoped Mrs. Curdle was well, as also Mr. Curdle, who at the same time appeared. Mrs. Curdle was dressed in a morning wrapper, with a little cap stuck upon the top of her head. Mr. Curdle wore a loose robe on his back, and his right forefinger on his forehead after the portraits of Sterne, to whom somebody or other had once said he bore a striking resemblance.

"I venture to call, for the purpose of asking whether you would put your name to my bespeak, ma'am," said Miss Snevellicci, producing documents.

"Oh! I really don't know what to say," replied Mrs. Curdle. "It's not as if the theatre was in its high and palmy days — you needn't stand, Miss Snevellicci — the drama is gone, perfectly gone."

"As an exquisite embodiment of the poet's visions, and a realization of human intellectuality, gilding with refulgent light our dreamy moments, and laying open a new and magic world before the mental eye, the drama is gone, perfectly gone," said Mr. Curdle.

"What man is there, now living, who can present

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before us all those changing and prismatic colors with which the character of Hamlet is invested?" exclaimed Mrs. Curdle.

"What man indeed — upon the stage," said Mr. Curdle, with a small reservation in favor of himself. "Hamlet! Pooh! ridiculous! Hamlet is gone, perfectly gone."

Quite overcome by these dismal reflections, Mr. and Mrs. Curdle sighed, and sat for some short time without speaking. At length, the lady, turning to Miss Snevellicci, inquired what play she proposed to have.

"Quite a new one," said Miss Snevellicci, "of which this gentleman is the author, and in which he plays; being his first appearance on any stage. Mr. Johnson is the gentleman's name."

"I hope you have preserved the unities, sir?" said Mr. Curdle.

"The original piece is a French one," said Nicholas. "There is abundance of incident, sprightly dialogue, strongly marked characters —"

"— All unavailing without a strict observance of the unities, sir," returned Mr. Curdle. "The unities of the drama, before everything."

"Might I ask you," said Nicholas, hesitating between the respect he ought to assume, and his love of the whimsical, "might I ask you what the unities are?"

Mr. Curdle coughed and considered. "The unities, sir," he said, "are a completeness — a kind of universal dovetailedness with regard to place and time — a sort of a general oneness, if I may be allowed to use so strong an expression. I take those to be the dramatic unities, so far as I have

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been enabled to bestow attention upon them, and I have read much upon the subject, and thought much. I find, running through the performances of this child," said Mr. Curdle, turning to the phenomenon, "a unity of feeling, a breadth, a light and shade, a warmth of coloring, a tone, a harmony, a glow, an artistical development of original conceptions, which I look for, in vain, among older performers — I don't know whether I make myself understood?"

"Perfectly," replied Nicholas.

"Just so," said Mr. Curdle, pulling up his neckcloth. "That is my definition of the unities of the drama."

Mrs. Curdle had sat listening to this lucid explanation with great complacency. It being finished, she inquired what Mr. Curdle thought about putting down their names.

"I don't know, my dear; upon my word I don't know," said Mr. Curdle. "If we do, it must be distinctly understood that we do not pledge ourselves to the quality of the performances. Let it go forth to the world, that we do not give *them* the sanction of our names, but that we confer the distinction merely upon Miss Snevellicci. That being clearly stated, I take it to be, as it were, a duty, that we should extend our patronage to a degraded stage, even for the sake of the associations with which it is entwined. Have you got two and sixpence for half a crown, Miss Snevellicci?" said Mr. Curdle, turning over four of those pieces of money.

Miss Snevellicci felt in all the corners of the pink reticule, but there was nothing in any of them. Nicholas murmured a jest about his being

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an author, and thought it best not to go through the form of feeling in his own pockets at all.

"Let me see," said Mr. Curdle; "twice four's eight—four shillings apiece to the boxes, Miss Snevellicci, is exceedingly dear in the present state of the drama—three half-crowns is seven and six; we shall not differ about sixpence, I suppose? Sixpence will not part us, Miss Snevellicci?"

Poor Miss Snevellicci took the three half-crowns, with many smiles and bends, and Mrs. Curdle, adding several supplementary directions relative to keeping the places for them, and dusting the seat, and sending two clean bills as soon as they came out, rang the bell, as a signal for breaking up the conference.

"Odd people those," said Nicholas, when they got clear of the house.

"I assure you," said Miss Snevellicci, taking his arm, "that I think myself very lucky they did not owe all the money instead of being sixpence short. Now, if you were to succeed, they would give people to understand that they had always patronized you; and if you were to fail, they would have been quite certain of that from the very beginning."

At the next house they visited, they were in great glory; for there resided the six children who were so enraptured with the public actions of the phenomenon, and who, being called down from the nursery to be treated with a private view of that young lady, proceeded to poke their fingers into her eyes, and tread upon her toes, and show her many other little attentions peculiar to their time of life.

"I shall certainly persuade Mr. Borum to take a private box," said the lady of the house, after a

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most gracious reception. "I shall only take two of the children, and will make up the rest of the party, of gentlemen — your admirers, Miss Snevellicci. Augustus, you naughty boy, leave the little girl alone."

This was addressed to a young gentleman who was pinching the phenomenon behind, apparently with a view of ascertaining whether she was real.

"I am sure you must be very tired," said the mamma, turning to Miss Snevellicci. "I cannot think of allowing you to go, without first taking a glass of wine. Fie, Charlotte, I am ashamed of you! Miss Lane, my dear, pray see to the children."

Miss Lane was the governess, and this entreaty was rendered necessary by the abrupt behavior of the youngest Miss Borum, who, having filched the phenomenon's little green parasol, was now carrying it bodily off, while the distracted infant looked helplessly on.

"I am sure, where you ever learned to act as you do," said good-natured Mrs. Borum, turning again to Miss Snevellicci, "I cannot understand (Emma, don't stare so); laughing in one piece, and crying in the next, and so natural in all — oh, dear!"

"I am very happy to hear you express so favorable an opinion," said Miss Snevellicci. "It's quite delightful to think you like it."

"Like it!" cried Mrs. Borum. "Who can help liking it? I would go to the play twice a week if I could: I dote upon it — only you're too affecting sometimes. You do put me in such a state — into such fits of crying! Goodness gracious me, Miss Lane, how can you let them torment that poor child so!"

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The phenomenon was really in a fair way of being torn limb from limb; for two strong little boys, one holding on by each of her hands, were dragging her in different directions as a trial of strength. However, Miss Lane (who had herself been too much occupied in contemplating the grown-up actors, to pay the necessary attention to these proceedings) rescued the unhappy infant at this juncture, who, being recruited with a glass of wine, was shortly afterwards taken away by her friends, after sustaining no more serious damage than a flattening of the pink gauze bonnet, and a rather extensive creasing of the white frock and trousers.

It was a trying morning; for there were a great many calls to make, and everybody wanted a different thing. Some wanted tragedies, and others comedies; some objected to dancing; some wanted scarcely anything else. Some thought the comic singer decidedly low, and others hoped he would have more to do than he usually had. Some people wouldn't promise to go, because other people wouldn't promise to go; and other people wouldn't go at all, because other people went. At length, and by little and little, omitting something in this place, and adding something in that, Miss Snevellicci pledged herself to a bill of fare which was comprehensive enough, if it had no other merit (it included, among other trifles, four pieces, divers songs, a few combats, and several dances); and they returned home, pretty well exhausted with the business of the day.

Nicholas worked away at the piece, which was speedily put into rehearsal, and then worked away at his own part, which he studied with great perseverance and acted — as the whole company said —

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The great bespeak for Miss Snevellicci.

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to perfection. And at length the great day arrived. The crier was sent round, in the morning, to proclaim the entertainments with the sound of bell in all the thoroughfares; and extra bills of three feet long by nine inches wide were dispersed in all directions, flung down all the areas, thrust under all the knockers, and developed in all the shops. They were placarded on all the walls too, though not with complete success, for an illiterate person having undertaken this office during the indisposition of the regular bill-sticker, a part were posted sideways, and the remainder upside down.

At half-past five, there was a rush of four people to the gallery-door; at a quarter before six, there were at least a dozen; at six o'clock the kicks were terrific; and when the elder Master Crummles opened the door, he was obliged to run behind it for his life. Fifteen shillings were taken by Mrs. Grudden in the first ten minutes.

Behind the scenes, the same unwonted excitement prevailed. Miss Snevellicci was in such a perspiration that the paint would scarcely stay on her face. Mrs. Crummles was so nervous that she could hardly remember her part. Miss Bravassa's ringlets came out of curl with the heat and anxiety; even Mr. Crummles himself kept peeping through the hole in the curtain, and running back, every now and then, to announce that another man had come into the pit.

At last, the orchestra left off, and the curtain rose upon the new piece. The first scene, in which there was nobody particular, passed off calmly enough, but when Miss Snevellicci went on in the second, accompanied by the phenomenon as child,

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what a roar of applause broke out! The people in the Borum box rose as one man, waving their hats and handkerchiefs, and uttering shouts of "bravo!" Mrs. Borum and the governess cast wreaths upon the stage, of which some fluttered into the lamps, and one crowned the temples of a fat gentleman in the pit, who, looking eagerly towards the scene, remained unconscious of the honor; the tailor and his family kicked at the panels of the upper boxes till they threatened to come out altogether; the very ginger-beer boy remained transfixed in the centre of the house; a young officer, supposed to entertain a passion for Miss Snevellicci, stuck his glass in his eye as though to hide a tear. Again and again Miss Snevellicci courtesied lower and lower, and again and again the applause came down, louder and louder. At length, when the phenomenon picked up one of the smoking wreaths and put it on, sideways, over Miss Snevellicci's eye, it reached its climax, and the play proceeded.

But when Nicholas came on for his crack scene with Mrs. Crummles, what a clapping of hands there was! When Mrs. Crummles (who was his unworthy mother) sneered, and called him "presumptuous boy," and he defied her, what a tumult of applause came on! When he quarrelled with the other gentleman about the young lady, and producing a case of pistols, said, that if he *was* a gentleman, he would fight him in that drawing-room, until the furniture was sprinkled with the blood of one, if not of two — how boxes, pit, and gallery, joined in one most vigorous cheer! When he called his mother names, because she wouldn't give up the young lady's property, and she, relenting, caused

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him to relent likewise, and fall down on one knee and ask her blessing, how the ladies in the audience sobbed! When he was hid behind the curtain in the dark, and the wicked relation poked a sharp sword in every direction, save where his legs were plainly visible, what a thrill of anxious fear ran through the house! His air, his figure, his walk, his look, everything he said or did, was the subject of commendation. There was a round of applause every time he spoke. And when, at last, in the pump-and-tub scene, Mrs. Grudden lighted the blue fire, and all the unemployed members of the company came in, and tumbled down in various directions — not because that had anything to do with the plot, but in order to finish off with a tableau — the audience (who had by this time increased considerably) gave vent to such a shout of enthusiasm as had not been heard in those walls for many and many a day.

In short, the success both of new piece and new actor was complete, and when Miss Snevellicci was called for at the end of the play, Nicholas led her on, and divided the applause.

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CHAPTER IV.

CONCERNING A YOUNG LADY FROM LONDON, WHO JOINS THE COMPANY, AND AN ELDERLY ADMIRER WHO FOLLOWS IN HER TRAIN; WITH AN AFFECTING CEREMONY CONSEQUENT ON THEIR ARRIVAL.

THE new piece, being a decided hit, was announced for every evening of performance until further notice, and the evenings when the theatre was closed were reduced from three in the week to two. Nor were these the only tokens of extraordinary success; for, on the succeeding Saturday, Nicholas received, by favor of the indefatigable Mrs. Grudden, no less a sum than thirty shillings; besides which substantial reward, he enjoyed considerable fame and honor: having a presentation copy of Mr. Curdle's pamphlet forwarded to the theatre, with that gentleman's own autograph (in itself an inestimable treasure) on the fly-leaf, accompanied with a note, containing many expressions of approval, and an unsolicited assurance that Mr. Curdle would be very happy to read Shakspeare to him for three hours every morning before breakfast during his stay in the town.

"I've got another novelty, Johnson," said Mr. Crummles one morning in great glee.

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"What's that?" rejoined Nicholas. "The pony?"

"No, no, we never come to the pony till everything else has failed," said Mr. Crummles. "I don't think we shall come to the pony at all, this season. No, no, not the pony."

"A boy phenomenon, perhaps?" suggested Nicholas.

"There is only one phenomenon, sir," replied Mr. Crummles impressively, "and that's a girl."

"Very true," said Nicholas. "I beg your pardon. Then I don't know what it is, I am sure."

"What should you say to a young lady from London?" inquired Mr. Crummles. "Miss So-and-so, of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane?"

"I should say she would look very well in the bills," said Nicholas.

"You're about right there," said Mr. Crummles; "and if you had said she would look very well upon the stage too, you wouldn't have been far out. Look here; what do you think of this?"

With this inquiry Mr. Crummles unfolded a red poster, and a blue poster, and a yellow poster, at the top of each of which public notification was inscribed in enormous characters — "First appearance of the unrivalled Miss Petowker of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane!"

"Dear me!" said Nicholas, "I know that lady."

"Then you are acquainted with as much talent as was ever compressed into one young person's body," retorted Mr. Crummles, rolling up the bills again; "that is, talent of a certain sort — of a certain sort. 'The Blood Drinker,'" added Mr. Crummles with a prophetic sigh, "'The Blood

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Drinker' will die with that girl; and she's the only sylph *I* ever saw, who could stand upon one leg, and play the tambourine on her other knee *like* a sylph."

"When does she come down?" asked Nicholas.

"We expect her to-day," replied Mr. Crummles. "She is an old friend of Mrs. Crummles's. Mrs. Crummles saw what she could do — always knew it from the first. She taught her, indeed, nearly all she knows. Mrs. Crummles was the original Blood Drinker."

"Was she, indeed?"

"Yes. She was obliged to give it up, though."

"Did it disagree with her?" asked Nicholas.

"Not so much with her, as with her audiences," replied Mr. Crummles. "Nobody could stand it. It was too tremendous. You don't quite know what Mrs. Crummles is yet."

Nicholas ventured to insinuate that he thought he did.

"No, no, you don't," said Mr. Crummles; "you don't, indeed. *I* don't, and that's a fact. I don't think her country will, till she is dead. Some new proof of talent bursts from that astonishing woman every year of her life. Look at her — mother of six children — three of 'em alive, and all upon the stage!"

"Extraordinary!" cried Nicholas.

"Ah! extraordinary indeed," rejoined Mr. Crummles, taking a complacent pinch of snuff, and shaking his head gravely. "I pledge you my professional word I didn't even know she could dance, till her last benefit, and then she played Juliet, and Helen Macgregor, and did the skipping-rope hornpipe

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between the pieces. The very first time I saw that admirable woman, Johnson," said Mr. Crummles, drawing a little nearer, and speaking in the tone of confidential friendship, "she stood upon her head on the butt-end of a spear, surrounded with blazing fireworks."

"You astonish me!" said Nicholas.

"*She* astonished *me!*" returned Mr. Crummles, with a very serious countenance. "Such grace, coupled with such dignity! I adored her from that moment!"

The arrival of the gifted subject of these remarks put an abrupt termination to Mr. Crummles's eulogium. Almost immediately afterwards, Master Percy Crummles entered with a letter, which had arrived by the General Post, and was directed to his gracious mother; at sight of the superscription whereof, Mrs. Crummles exclaimed, "From Henrietta Petowker, I do declare!" and instantly became absorbed in the contents.

"Is it — ?" inquired Mr. Crummles, hesitating.

"Oh, yes, it's all right," replied Mrs. Crummles, anticipating the question. "What an excellent thing for her, to be sure!"

"It's the best thing altogether, that I ever heard of, I think," said Mr. Crummles; and then Mr. Crummles, Mrs. Crummles, and Master Percy Crummles, all fell to laughing violently. Nicholas left them to enjoy their mirth together, and walked to his lodgings; wondering very much what mystery connected with Miss Petowker could provoke such merriment, and pondering still more on the extreme surprise with which that lady would regard his sudden enlistment in a profession of which

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she was such a distinguished and brilliant ornament.

But, in this latter respect he was mistaken; for — whether Mr. Vincent Crummles had paved the way, or Miss Petowker had some special reason for treating him with even more than her usual amiability — their meeting at the theatre next day was more like that of two dear friends who had been inseparable from infancy, than a recognition passing between a lady and gentleman who had only met some half-dozen times, and then by mere chance. Nay, Miss Petowker even whispered that she had wholly dropped the Kenwigses in her conversations with the manager's family, and had represented herself as having encountered Mr. Johnson in the very first and most fashionable circles; and on Nicholas receiving this intelligence with unfeigned surprise, she added, with a sweet glance, that she had a claim on his good-nature now, and might tax it before long.

Nicholas had the honor of playing in a slight piece with Miss Petowker that night, and could not but observe that the warmth of her reception was mainly attributable to a most persevering umbrella in the upper boxes; he saw, too, that the enchanting actress cast many sweet looks towards the quarter whence these sounds proceeded; and that every time she did so, the umbrella broke out afresh. Once, he thought that a peculiarly shaped hat in the same corner was not wholly unknown to him; but, being occupied with his share of the stage business, he bestowed no great attention upon this circumstance, and it had quite vanished from his memory by the time he reached home.

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He had just sat down to supper with Smike, when one of the people of the house came outside the door, and announced that a gentleman below-stairs wished to speak to Mr. Johnson.

"Well, if he does, you must tell him to come up; that's all I know," replied Nicholas. "One of our hungry brethren, I suppose, Smike."

His fellow-lodger looked at the cold meat in silent calculation of the quantity that would be left for dinner next day, and put back a slice he had cut for himself, in order that the visitor's encroachments might be less formidable in their effects.

"It is not anybody who has been here before," said Nicholas, "for he is tumbling up every stair. Come in, come in. In the name of wonder! Mr. Lillyvick?"

It was, indeed, the collector of water-rates, who, regarding Nicholas with a fixed look and immovable countenance, shook hands with most portentous solemnity, and sat himself down in a seat by the chimney-corner.

"Why, when did you come here?" asked Nicholas.

"This morning, sir," replied Mr. Lillyvick.

"Oh! I see; then you were at the theatre to-night, and it was your umb—"

"This umbrella," said Mr. Lillyvick, producing a fat green cotton one with a battered ferrule. "What did you think of that performance?"

"So far as I could judge, being on the stage," replied Nicholas, "I thought it very agreeable."

"Agreeable!" cried the collector. "I mean to say, sir, that it was delicious."

Mr. Lillyvick bent forward to pronounce the last

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word with greater emphasis; and having done so, drew himself up, and frowned and nodded a great many times.

"I say, delicious," repeated Mr. Lillyvick. "Absorbing, fairy-like, toomultuous," and again Mr. Lillyvick drew himself up, and again he frowned and nodded.

"Ah!" said Nicholas, a little surprised at these symptoms of ecstatic approbation. "Yes — she is a clever girl."

"She is a divinity," returned Mr. Lillyvick, giving a collector's double knock on the ground with the umbrella before mentioned. "I have known divine actresses before now, sir, I used to collect — at least I used to *call* for — and very often call for — the water-rate at the house of a divine actress, who lived in my beat for upwards of four year, but never — no, never, sir — of all divine creatures, actresses or no actresses, did I see a diviner one than is Henrietta Petowker."

Nicholas had much ado to prevent himself from laughing; not trusting himself to speak, he merely nodded in accordance with Mr. Lillyvick's nods, and remained silent.

"Let me speak a word with you in private," said Mr. Lillyvick.

Nicholas looked good-humoredly at Smike, who, taking the hint, disappeared.

"A bachelor is a miserable wretch, sir," said Mr. Lillyvick.

"Is he?" asked Nicholas.

"He is," rejoined the collector. "I have lived in the world for nigh sixty year, and I ought to know what it is."

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"You *ought* to know, certainly," thought Nicholas; "but whether you do or not, is another question."

"If a bachelor happens to have saved a little matter of money," said Mr. Lillyvick, "his sisters and brothers, and nephews and nieces, look *to* that money, and not to him; even if, by being a public character, he is the head of the family, or, as it may be, the main from which all the other little branches are turned on, they still wish him dead all the while, and get low-spirited every time they see him looking in good health, because they want to come into his little property. You see that?"

"Oh, yes," replied Nicholas: "it's very true, no doubt."

"The great reason for not being married," resumed Mr. Lillyvick, "is the expense; that's what's kept me off, or else — Lord!" said Mr. Lillyvick, snapping his fingers, "I might have had fifty women."

"Fine women?" asked Nicholas.

"Fine women, sir!" replied the collector; "ay! not so fine as Henrietta Petowker, for she is an uncommon specimen, but such women as don't fall into every man's way, I can tell you. Now suppose a man can get a fortune *in* a wife instead of with her — eh?"

"Why, then, he's a lucky fellow," replied Nicholas.

"That's what I say," retorted the collector, patting him benignantly on the side of the head with his umbrella; "just what I say. Henrietta Petowker, the talented Henrietta Petowker, has a fortune in herself, and I am going to —"

"To make her Mrs. Lillyvick?" suggested Nicholas.

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"No, sir, not to make her Mrs. Lillyvick," replied the collector. "Actresses, sir, always keep their maiden names — that's the regular thing — but I'm going to marry her; and the day after to-morrow, too."

"I congratulate you, sir," said Nicholas.

"Thank you, sir," replied the collector, buttoning his waistcoat. "I shall draw her salary, of course, and I hope after all that it's nearly as cheap to keep two as it is to keep one; that's a consolation."

"Surely you don't want any consolation at such a moment?" observed Nicholas.

"No," replied Mr. Lillyvick, shaking his head nervously: "no — of course not."

"But how come you both here, if you're going to be married, Mr. Lillyvick?" asked Nicholas.

"Why, that's what I came to explain to you," replied the collector of water-rate. "The fact is, we have thought it best to keep it secret from the family."

"Family!" said Nicholas. "What family?"

"The Kenwigses of course," rejoined Mr. Lillyvick. "If my niece and the children had known a word about it before I came away, they'd have gone into fits at my feet, and never have come out of 'em till I took an oath not to marry anybody — or they'd have got out a commission of lunacy, or some dreadful thing," said the collector, quite trembling as he spoke.

"To be sure," said Nicholas. "Yes; they would have been jealous, no doubt."

"To prevent which," said Mr. Lillyvick, "Henrietta Petowker (it was settled between us) should come down here to her friends, the Crummleses,

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under pretence of this engagement, and I should go down to Guildford the day before, and join her on the coach there, which I did, and we came down from Guildford yesterday together. Now, for fear you should be writing to Mr. Noggs, and might say anything about us, we have thought it best to let you into the secret. We shall be married from the Crummleses' lodgings, and shall be delighted to see you — either before church or at breakfast-time, which you like. It won't be expensive, you know," said the collector, highly anxious to prevent any misunderstanding on this point; "just muffins and coffee, with perhaps a shrimp or something of that sort for a relish, you know."

"Yes, yes, I understand," replied Nicholas. "Oh, I shall be most happy to come; it will give me the greatest pleasure. Where's the lady stopping — with Mrs. Crummles?"

"Why, no," said the collector; "they couldn't very well dispose of her at night, and so she is staying with an acquaintance of hers, and another young lady; they both belong to the theatre."

"Miss Snevellicci, I suppose?" said Nicholas.

"Yes, that's the name."

"And they'll be bridesmaids, I presume?" said Nicholas.

"Why," said the collector, with a rueful face, "they *will* have four bridesmaids; I'm afraid they'll make it rather theatrical."

"Oh, no, not at all," replied Nicholas, with an awkward attempt to convert a laugh into a cough. "Who may the four be? Miss Snevellicci of course — Miss Ledrook —"

"The — the phenomenon," groaned the collector.

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"Ha, ha!" cried Nicholas. "I beg your pardon, I don't know what I'm laughing at — yes, that'll be very pretty — the phenomenon — who else?"

"Some young woman or other," replied the collector, rising; "some other friend of Henrietta Petowker's. Well, you'll be careful not to say anything about it, will you?"

"You may safely depend upon me," replied Nicholas. "Won't you take anything to eat or drink?"

"No," said the collector; "I haven't any appetite. I should think it was a very pleasant life, the married one — eh?"

"I have not the least doubt of it," rejoined Nicholas.

"Yes," said the collector; "certainly. Oh, yes. No doubt. Good-night."

With these words, Mr. Lillyvick, whose manner had exhibited through the whole of this interview a most extraordinary compound of precipitation, hesitation, confidence and doubt, fondness, misgiving, meanness, and self-importance, turned his back upon the room, and left Nicholas to enjoy a laugh by himself if he felt so disposed.

Without stopping to inquire whether the intervening day appeared to Nicholas to consist of the usual number of hours of the ordinary length, it may be remarked that, to the parties more directly interested in the forthcoming ceremony, it passed with great rapidity, insomuch that when Miss Petowker awoke on the succeeding morning in the chamber of Miss Snevellicci, she declared that nothing should ever persuade her that that really was the day which was to behold a change in her condition.

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"I never will believe it," said Miss Petowker; "I cannot really. It's of no use talking, I never can make up my mind to go through with such a trial!"

On hearing this Miss Snevellicci and Miss Ledrook who knew perfectly well that their fair friend's mind had been made up for three or four years, at any period of which time she would have cheerfully undergone the desperate trial now approaching if she could have found any eligible gentleman disposed for the venture, began to preach comfort and firmness, and to say how very proud she ought to feel that it was in her power to confer lasting bliss on a deserving object, and how necessary it was for the happiness of mankind in general that women should possess fortitude and resignation on such occasions; and that although for their parts they held true happiness to consist in a single life, which they would not willingly exchange — no, not for any worldly consideration — still (thank God), if ever the time *should* come, they hoped they knew their duty too well to repine, but would the rather submit with meekness and humility of spirit to a fate for which Providence had clearly designed them with a view to the contentment and reward of their fellow-creatures.

"I might feel it was a great blow," said Miss Snevellicci, "to break up old associations and what-do-you-callems of that kind, but I would submit, my dear, I would indeed."

"So would I," said Miss Ledrook; "I would rather court the yoke than shun it. I have broken hearts before now, and I'm very sorry for it: for it's a terrible thing to reflect upon."

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"It is indeed," said Miss Snevellicci. "Now, Led, my dear, we must positively get her ready, or we shall be too late, we shall indeed."

This pious reasoning, and perhaps the fear of being too late, supported the bride through the ceremony of robing, after which, strong tea and brandy were administered in alternate doses as a means of strengthening her feeble limbs and causing her to walk steadier.

"How do you feel now, my love?" inquired Miss Snevellicci.

"Oh, Lillyvick!" cried the bride. "If you knew what I am undergoing for you!"

"Of course he knows it, love, and will never forget it," said Miss Ledrook.

"Do you think he won't?" cried Miss Petowker, really showing great capability for the stage. "Oh, do you think he won't? Do you think Lillyvick will always remember it — always, always, always?"

There is no knowing in what this burst of feeling might have ended, if Miss Snevellicci had not at that moment proclaimed the arrival of the fly, which so astounded the bride that she shook off divers alarming symptoms which were coming on very strong, and, running to the glass, adjusted her dress, and calmly declared that she was ready for the sacrifice.

She was accordingly supported into the coach, and there "kept up" (as Miss Snevellicci said) with perpetual sniffs of *sal volatile* and sips of brandy and other gentle stimulants, until they reached the manager's door, which was already opened by the two Master Crummleses, who wore white cockades, and were decorated with the choicest and most resplen-

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dent waistcoats in the theatrical wardrobe. By the combined exertions of these young gentlemen and the bridesmaids, assisted by the coachman, Miss Petowker was at length supported in a condition of much exhaustion to the first floor, where she no sooner encountered the youthful bridegroom than she fainted with great decorum.

"Henrietta Petowker!" said the collector; "cheer up, my lovely one."

Miss Petowker grasped the collector's hand, but emotion choked her utterance.

"Is the sight of me so dreadful, Henrietta Petowker?" said the collector.

"Oh, no, no, no," rejoined the bride; "but all the friends — the darling friends — of my youthful days — to leave them all — it is such a shock!"

With such expressions of sorrow, Miss Petowker went on to enumerate the dear friends of her youthful days one by one, and to call upon such of them as were present to come and embrace her. This done, she remembered that Mrs. Crummles had been more than a mother to her, and after that, that Mr. Crummles had been more than a father to her, and after that, that the Master Crummleses and Miss Ninetta Crummles had been more than brothers and sisters to her. These various remembrances being each accompanied with a series of hugs, occupied a long time, and they were obliged to drive to church very fast, for fear they should be too late.

The procession consisted of two flies; in the first of which were Miss Bravassa (the fourth bridesmaid), Mrs. Crummles, the collector, and Mr. Folair, who had been chosen as his second on the occasion. In the other were the bride, Mr. Crummles, Miss

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Snevellicci, Miss Ledrook, and the phenomenon. The costumes were beautiful. The bridesmaids were quite covered with artificial flowers, and the phenomenon, in particular, was rendered almost invisible by the portable arbor in which she was enshrined. Miss Ledrook, who was of a romantic turn, wore in her breast the miniature of some field-officer unknown, which she had purchased, a great bargain, not very long before; the other ladies displayed several dazzling articles of imitative jewelry, almost equal to real; and Mrs. Crummles came out in a stern and gloomy majesty, which attracted the admiration of all beholders.

But, perhaps the appearance of Mr. Crummles was more striking and appropriate than that of any member of the party. This gentleman, who personated the bride's father, had, in pursuance of a happy and original conception, "made up" for the part by arraying himself in a theatrical wig, of a style and pattern commonly known as a brown George, and moreover assuming a snuff-colored suit, of the previous century, with gray silk stockings, and buckles to his shoes. The better to support his assumed character he had determined to be greatly overcome, and, consequently, when they entered the church, the sobs of the affectionate parent were so heart-rending that the pew-opener suggested the propriety of his retiring to the vestry, and comforting himself with a glass of water before the ceremony began.

The procession up the aisle was beautiful. The bride, with the four bridesmaids, forming a group previously arranged and rehearsed; the collector, followed by his second, imitating his walk and

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gestures to the indescribable amusement of some theatrical friends in the gallery; Mr. Crummles, with an infirm and feeble gait; Mrs. Crummles advancing with that stage walk, which consists of a stride and a stop alternately, — it was the completest thing ever witnessed. The ceremony was very quickly disposed of, and all parties present having signed the register (for which purpose, when it came to his turn, Mr. Crummles carefully wiped and put on an immense pair of spectacles), they went back to breakfast in high spirits. And here they found Nicholas awaiting their arrival.

"Now, then," said Crummles, who had been assisting Mrs. Grudden in the preparations, which were on a more extensive scale than was quite agreeable to the collector. "Breakfast, breakfast."

No second invitation was required. The company crowded and squeezed themselves at the table as well as they could, and fell to, immediately: Miss Petowker blushing very much when anybody was looking, and eating very much when anybody was *not* looking; and Mr. Lillyvick going to work as though with the cool resolve, that since the good things must be paid for by him, he would leave as little as possible for the Crummleses to eat up afterwards.

"It's very soon done, sir, isn't it?" inquired Mr. Folair of the collector, leaning over the table to address him.

"What is soon done, sir?" returned Mr. Lillyvick.

"The tying up — the fixing one's self with a wife," replied Mr. Folair. "It don't take long, does it?"

"No, sir," replied Mr. Lillyvick, coloring. "It does not take long. And what then, sir?"

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"Oh! nothing," said the actor. "It don't take a man long to hang himself, either, eh? ha, ha!"

Mr. Lillyvick laid down his knife and fork, and looked round the table with indignant astonishment.

"To hang himself!" repeated Mr. Lillyvick.

A profound silence came upon all, for Mr. Lillyvick was dignified beyond expression.

"To hang himself!" cried Mr. Lillyvick again. "Is any parallel attempted to be drawn in this company between matrimony and hanging?"

"The noose, you know," said Mr. Folair, a little crestfallen.

"The noose, sir?" retorted Mr. Lillyvick. "Does any man dare to speak to me of a noose, and Henrietta Pe—"

"Lillyvick," suggested Mr. Crummles.

"—And Henrietta Lillyvick in the same breath?" said the collector. "In this house, in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Crummles, who have brought up a talented and virtuous family, to be blessings and phenomenons, and what not, are we to hear talk of nooses?"

"Folair," said Mr. Crummles, deeming it a matter of decency to be affected by this allusion to himself and partner, "I'm astonished at you."

"What are you going on in this way at me for?" urged the unfortunate actor. "What have I done?"

"Done, sir!" cried Mr. Lillyvick, "aimed a blow at the whole framework of society—"

"And the best and tenderest feelings," added Crummles, relapsing into the old man.

"And the highest and most estimable of social ties," said the collector. "Noose! As if one was

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caught, trapped into the married state, pinned by the leg, instead of going into it of one's own accord and glorying in the act!"

"I didn't mean to make it out, that you were caught and trapped, and pinned by the leg," replied the actor. "I'm sorry for it; I can't say any more."

"So you ought to be, sir," returned Mr. Lillyvick; "and I am glad to hear that you have enough of feeling left to be so."

The quarrel appearing to terminate with this reply, Mrs. Lillyvick considered that the fittest occasion (the attention of the company being no longer distracted) to burst into tears, and require the assistance of all four bridesmaids, which was immediately rendered, though not without some confusion, for the room being small and the table-cloth long, a whole detachment of plates were swept off the board at the very first move. Regardless of this circumstance, however, Mrs. Lillyvick refused to be comforted until the belligerents had passed their words that the dispute should be carried no further, which, after a sufficient show of reluctance, they did, and from that time Mr. Folair sat in moody silence, contenting himself with pinching Nicholas's leg when anything was said, and so expressing his contempt both for the speaker and the sentiments to which he gave utterance.

There were a great number of speeches made; some by Nicholas, and some by Crummles, and some by the collector; two by the Master Crummleses in returning thanks for themselves, and one by the phenomenon on behalf of the bridesmaids, at which Mrs. Crummles shed tears. There was some sing-

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ing, too, from Miss Ledrook and Miss Bravassa, and very likely there might have been more, if the fly-driver, who stopped to drive the happy pair to the spot where they proposed to take steamboat to Ryde, had not sent in a peremptory message intimating, that if they didn't come directly he should infallibly demand eighteenpence over and above his agreement.

This desperate threat effectually broke up the party. After a most pathetic leave-taking, Mr. Lillyvick and his bride departed for Ryde, where they were to spend the next two days in profound retirement, and whither they were accompanied by the infant, who had been appointed travelling bridesmaid on Mr. Lillyvick's express stipulation: as the steamboat people, deceived by her size, would (he had previously ascertained) transport her at half-price.

As there was no performance that night, Mr. Crummles declared his intention of keeping it up till everything to drink was disposed of; but Nicholas, having to play Romeo for the first time on the ensuing evening, contrived to slip away in the midst of a temporary confusion, occasioned by the unexpected development of strong symptoms of inebriety in the conduct of Mrs. Grudden.

To this act of desertion he was led, not only by his own inclinations, but by his anxiety on account of Smike, who, having to sustain the character of the Apothecary, had been as yet wholly unable to get any more of the part into his head than the general idea that he was very hungry, which—perhaps from old recollections—he had acquired with great aptitude.

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Nicholas instructs Smike in the Art of Acting.

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"I don't know what's to be done, Smike," said Nicholas, laying down the book. "I am afraid you can't learn it, my poor fellow."

"I am afraid not," said Smike, shaking his head. "I think if you — but that would give you so much trouble."

"What?" inquired Nicholas. "Never mind me."

"I think," said Smike, "if you were to keep saying it to me in little bits, over and over again, I should be able to recollect it from hearing you."

"Do you think so?" exclaimed Nicholas. "Well said. Let us see who tires first. Not I, Smike, trust me. Now, then. 'Who calls so loud?'"

"'Who calls so loud?'" said Smike.

"'Who calls so loud?'" repeated Nicholas.

"'Who calls so loud?'" cried Smike.

Thus they continued to ask each other who called so loud, over and over again; and when Smike had that by heart Nicholas went to another sentence, and then to two at a time, and then to three, and so on, until at midnight poor Smike found to his unspeakable joy that he really began to remember something about the text.

Early in the morning they went to it again, and Smike, rendered more confident by the progress he had already made, got on faster and with better heart. As soon as he began to acquire the words pretty freely, Nicholas showed him how he must come in with both hands spread out upon his stomach, and how he must occasionally rub it, in compliance with the established form by which people on the stage always denote that they want something to eat. After the morning's rehearsal they went to work again, nor did they stop, except

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for a hasty dinner, until it was time to repair to the theatre at night.

Never had master a more anxious, humble, docile pupil. Never had pupil a more patient, unwearying, considerate, kind-hearted master.

As soon as they were dressed, and at every interval when he was not upon the stage, Nicholas renewed his instructions. They prospered well. The Romeo was received with hearty plaudits and unbounded favor, and Smike was pronounced unanimously, alike by audience and actors, the very prince and prodigy of Apothecaries.

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CHAPTER V.

IS FRAUGHT WITH SOME DANGER TO MISS NICKLEBY'S PEACE OF MIND.

THE place was a handsome suite of private apartments in Regent Street; the time was three o'clock in the afternoon to the dull and plodding, and the first hour of morning to the gay and spirited; the persons were Lord Frederick Verisopht, and his friend Sir Mulberry Hawk.

These distinguished gentlemen were reclining listlessly on a couple of sofas, with a table between them, on which were scattered in rich confusion the materials of an untasted breakfast. Newspapers lay strewn about the room, but these, like the meal, were neglected and unnoticed; not, however, because any flow of conversation prevented the attractions of the journals from being called into request, for not a word was exchanged between the two, nor was any sound uttered, save when one, in tossing about to find an easier resting-place for his aching head, uttered an exclamation of impatience, and seemed for a moment to communicate a new restlessness to his companion.

These appearances would in themselves have furnished a pretty strong clew to the extent of the

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debauch of the previous night, even if there had not been other indications of the amusements in which it had been passed. A couple of billiard balls, all mud and dirt, two battered hats, a champagne bottle with a soiled glove twisted round the neck, to allow of its being grasped more surely in its capacity of an offensive weapon; a broken cane; a card-case without the top; an empty purse; a watch-guard snapped asunder; a handful of silver, mingled with fragments of half-smoked cigars, and their stale and crumbled ashes; — these, and many other tokens of riot and disorder, hinted very intelligibly at the nature of last night's gentlemanly frolics.

Lord Frederick Verisopht was the first to speak. Dropping his slippered foot on the ground, and yawning heavily, he struggled into a sitting posture, and turned his dull languid eyes towards his friend, to whom he called in a drowsy voice.

"Hallo!" replied Sir Mulberry, turning round.

"Are we going to lie here all da-a-y?" said the lord.

"I don't know that we're fit for anything else," replied Sir Mulberry; "yet awhile, at least. I haven't a grain of life in me this morning."

"Life!" cried Lord Verisopht. "I feel as if there would be nothing so snug and comfortable as to die at once."

"Then why don't you die?" said Sir Mulberry.

With which inquiry he turned his face away, and seemed to occupy himself in an attempt to fall asleep.

His hopeful friend and pupil drew a chair to the breakfast-table, and essayed to eat; but, finding

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that impossible, lounged to the window, then loitered up and down the room with his hand to his fevered head, and finally threw himself again on his sofa, and roused his friend once more.

"What the devil's the matter?" groaned Sir Mulberry, sitting upright on the couch.

Although Sir Mulberry said this with sufficient ill-humor, he did not seem to feel himself quite at liberty to remain silent; for, after stretching himself very often, and declaring with a shiver that it was "infernal cold," he made an experiment at the breakfast-table, and proving more successful in it than his less seasoned friend, remained there.

"Suppose," said Sir Mulberry, pausing with a morsel on the point of his fork, "suppose we go back to the subject of little Nickleby, eh?"

"Which little Nickleby; the money-lender or the ga-a-l?" asked Lord Verisopht.

"You take me, I see," replied Sir Mulberry. "The girl, of course."

"You promised me you'd find her out," said Lord Verisopht.

"So I did," rejoined his friend; "but I have thought further of the matter since then. You distrust me in the business — you shall find her out yourself."

"Na-ay," remonstrated Lord Verisopht.

"But I say yes," returned his friend. "You shall find her out yourself. Don't think that I mean, when you can — I know as well as you that if I did, you could never get sight of her without me. No. I say you shall find her out — *shall* — and I'll put you in the way."

"Now, curse me, if you ain't a real, deyvlish,

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downright, thorough-paced friend," said the young lord, on whom this speech had produced a most reviving effect.

"I'll tell you how," said Sir Mulberry. "She was at that dinner as a bait for you."

"No!" cried the young lord. "What the dey—"

"As a bait for you," repeated his friend; "old Nickleby told me so himself."

"What a fine old cock it is!" exclaimed Lord Verisopht; "a noble rascal!"

"Yes," said Sir Mulberry, "he knew she was a smart little creature —"

"Smart!" interposed the young lord. "Upon my soul, Hawk, she's a perfect beauty — a — a picture, a statue, a — a — upon my soul she is!"

"Well," replied Sir Mulberry, shrugging his shoulders and manifesting an indifference, whether he felt it or not; "that's a matter of taste; if mine doesn't agree with yours, so much the better."

"Confound it!" reasoned the lord, "you were thick enough with her that day, anyhow. I could hardly get in a word."

"Well enough for once, well enough for once," replied Sir Mulberry; "but not worth the trouble of being agreeable to again. If you seriously want to follow up the niece, tell the uncle that you must know where she lives and how she lives, and with whom, or you are no longer a customer of his. He'll tell you fast enough."

"Why didn't you say this before?" asked Lord Verisopht, "instead of letting me go on burning, consuming, dragging out a miserable existence for an a-age!"

"I didn't know it, in the first place," answered

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Sir Mulberry carelessly; "and in the second, I didn't believe you were so very much in earnest."

Now, the truth was, that in the interval which had elapsed since the dinner at Ralph Nickleby's, Sir Mulberry Hawk had been furtively trying by every means in his power to discover whence Kate had so suddenly appeared, and whither she had disappeared. Unassisted by Ralph, however, with whom he had held no communication since their angry parting on that occasion, all his efforts were wholly unavailing, and he had therefore arrived at the determination of communicating to the young lord the substance of the admission he had gleaned from that worthy. To this he was impelled by various considerations; among which the certainty of knowing whatever the weak young man knew was decidedly not the least, as the desire of encountering the usurer's niece again, and using his utmost arts to reduce her pride, and revenge himself for her contempt, was uppermost in his thoughts. It was a politic course of proceeding, and one which could not fail to redound to his advantage in every point of view, since the very circumstance of his having extorted from Ralph Nickleby his real design in introducing his niece to such society, coupled with his extreme disinterestedness in communicating it so freely to his friend, could not but advance his interests in that quarter, and greatly facilitate the passage of coin (pretty frequent and speedy already) from the pockets of Lord Frederick Verisopht to those of Sir Mulberry Hawk.

Thus reasoned Sir Mulberry, and in pursuance of this reasoning he and his friend soon afterwards repaired to Ralph Nickleby's, there to execute a

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plan of operations concerted by Sir Mulberry himself, avowedly to promote his friend's object, and really to attain his own.

They found Ralph at home, and alone. As he led them into the drawing-room, the recollection of the scene which had taken place there seemed to occur to him, for he cast a curious look at Sir Mulberry, who bestowed upon it no other acknowledgment than a careless smile.

They had a short conference upon some money matters then in progress, which were scarcely disposed of when the lordly dupe (in pursuance of his friend's instructions) requested with some embarrassment to speak to Ralph alone.

"Alone, eh?" cried Sir Mulberry, affecting surprise. "Oh, very good. I'll walk into the next room here. Don't keep me long, that's all."

So saying, Sir Mulberry took up his hat, and, humming a fragment of a song, disappeared through the door of communication between the two drawing-rooms, and closed it after him.

"Now, my lord," said Ralph, "what is it?"

"Nickleby," said his client, throwing himself along the sofa on which he had been previously seated, so as to bring his lips nearer to the old man's ear, "what a pretty creature your niece is!"

"Is she, my lord?" replied Ralph. "Maybe — maybe — I don't trouble my head with such matters."

"You know she's a deyvlish fine girl," said the client. "You must know that, Nickleby. Come, don't deny that."

"Yes, I believe she is considered so," replied Ralph. "Indeed, I know she is. If I did not, you

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are an authority on such points, and your taste, my lord — on all points, indeed — is undeniable."

Nobody but the young man to whom these words were addressed could have been deaf to the sneering tone in which they were spoken, or blind to the look of contempt by which they were accompanied. But Lord Frederick Verisopht was both, and took them to be complimentary.

"Well," he said, "p'raps you're a little right, and p'raps you're a little wrong — a little of both, Nickleby. I want to know where this beauty lives, that I may have another peep at her, Nickleby."

"Really —" Ralph began in his usual tones.

"Don't talk so loud," cried the other, achieving the great point of his lesson to a miracle. "I don't want Hawk to hear."

"You know he is your rival, do you?" said Ralph, looking sharply at him.

"He always is, d-a-amn him," replied the client; "and I want to steal a march upon him. Ha, ha, ha! He'll cut up so rough, Nickleby, at our talking together without him. Where does she live, Nickleby, that's all? Only tell me where she lives, Nickleby."

"He bites," thought Ralph. "He bites."

"Eh, Nickleby, eh?" pursued the client. "Where does she live?"

"Really, my lord," said Ralph, rubbing his hands slowly over each other, "I must think before I tell you."

"No, not a bit of it, Nickleby; you mustn't think at all," replied Verisopht. "Where is it?"

"No good can come of your knowing," replied Ralph. "She has been virtuously and well brought

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up; to be sure she is handsome, poor, unprotected —poor girl, poor girl."

Ralph ran over this brief summary of Kate's condition as if it were merely passing through his own mind, and he had no intention to speak aloud; but the shrewd sly look which he directed at his companion as he delivered it, gave this poor assumption the lie.

"I tell you I only want to see her," cried his client. "A ma-an may look at a pretty woman without harm, mayn't he? Now, where *does* she live? You know you're making a fortune out of me, Nickleby, and upon my soul nobody shall ever take me to anybody else, if you only tell me this."

"As you promise that, my lord," said Ralph, with feigned reluctance, "and as I am most anxious to oblige you, and as there's no harm in it — no harm — I'll tell you. But you had better keep it to yourself, my lord; strictly to yourself." Ralph pointed to the adjoining room as he spoke, and nodded expressively.

The young lord feigning to be equally impressed with the necessity of this precaution, Ralph disclosed the present address and occupation of his niece, observing that from what he heard of the family they appeared very ambitious to have distinguished acquaintances, and that a lord could, doubtless, introduce himself with great ease, if he felt disposed.

"Your object being only to see her again," said Ralph, "you could effect it at any time you chose by that means."

Lord Verisopht acknowledged the hint with a great many squeezes of Ralph's hard, horny hand,

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and whispering that they would now do well to close the conversation, called to Sir Mulberry Hawk that he might come back.

"I thought you had gone to sleep," said Sir Mulberry, reappearing with an ill-tempered air.

"Sorry to detain you," replied the gull; "but Nickleby has been so ama-azingly funny that I couldn't tear myself way."

"No, no," said Ralph; "it was all his lordship. You know what a witty, humorous, elegant, accomplished man Lord Frederick is. Mind the step, my lord — Sir Mulberry, pray give way."

With such courtesies as these, and many low bows, and the same cold sneer upon his face all the while, Ralph busied himself in showing his visitors downstairs, and otherwise than by the slightest possible motion about the corners of his mouth, returned no show of answer to the look of admiration with which Sir Mulberry Hawk seemed to compliment him on being such an accomplished and most consummate scoundrel.

There had been a ring at the bell a few minutes before, which was answered by Newman Noggs just as they reached the hall. In the ordinary course of business Newman would have either admitted the new-comer in silence, or have requested him or her to stand aside while the gentlemen passed out. But he no sooner saw who it was, than, as if for some private reason of his own, he boldly departed from the established custom of Ralph's mansion in business hours, and looking towards the respectable trio who were approaching, cried in a loud and sonorous voice, "Mrs. Nickleby!"

"Mrs. Nickleby!" cried Sir Mulberry Hawk,

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as his friend looked back, and stared him in the face.

It was, indeed, that well-intentioned lady, who, having received an offer for the empty house in the City directed to the landlord, had brought it post-haste to Mr. Nickleby without delay.

"Nobody *you* know," said Ralph. "Step into the office, my — my — dear. I'll be with you directly."

"Nobody I know!" cried Sir Mulberry Hawk, advancing to the astonished lady. "Is this Mrs. Nickleby — the mother of Miss Nickleby — the delightful creature that I had the happiness of meeting in this house the very last time I dined here? But, no," said Sir Mulberry, stopping short. "No, it can't be. There is the same cast of features, the same indescribable air of — But, no; no. This lady is too young for that."

"I think you can tell the gentleman, brother-in-law, if it concerns him to know," said Mrs. Nickleby, acknowledging the compliment with a graceful bend, "that Kate Nickleby is my daughter."

"Her daughter, my lord!" cried Sir Mulberry, turning to his friend. "This lady's daughter, my lord."

"My lord!" thought Mrs. Nickleby. "Well, I never did —"

"This, then, my lord," said Sir Mulberry, "is the lady to whose obliging marriage we owe so much happiness. This lady is the mother of sweet Miss Nickleby. Do you observe the extraordinary likeness, my lord? Nickleby — introduce us."

Ralph did so, in a kind of desperation.

"Upon my soul, it's a most delightful thing," said Lord Frederick, pressing forward. "How de do?"

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Mrs. Nickleby was too much flurried by these uncommonly kind salutations, and her regrets at not having on her other bonnet, to make any immediate reply, so she merely continued to bend and smile, and betray great agitation.

"A-and how is Miss Nickleby?" said Lord Frederick. "Well, I hope?"

"She is quite well, I'm obliged to you, my lord," returned Mrs. Nickleby, recovering. "Quite well. She wasn't well for some days after that day she dined here, and I can't help thinking, that she caught cold in that hackney coach coming home. Hackney coaches, my lord, are such nasty things, that it's almost better to walk at any time, for although I believe a hackney coachman can be transported for life, if he has a broken window, still they are so reckless, that they nearly all have broken windows. I once had a swelled face for six weeks, my lord, from riding in a hackney coach — I think it was a hackney coach," said Mrs. Nickleby, reflecting, "though I'm not quite certain whether it wasn't a chariot; at all events I know it was a dark green, with a very long number, beginning with a naught and ending with a nine — no, beginning with a nine, and ending with a naught, that was it, and of course the stamp-office people would know at once whether it was a coach or a chariot if any inquiries were made there — however that was, there it was with a broken window, and there was I for six weeks with a swelled face — I think that was the very same hackney coach that we found out afterwards had the top open all the time, and we should never even have known it, if they hadn't charged us a shilling an hour extra for having it open, which it seems is

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the law, or was then, and a most shameful law it appears to be — I don't understand the subject, but I should say the Corn Laws could be nothing to *that* act of Parliament."

Having pretty well run herself out by this time, Mrs. Nickleby stopped as suddenly as she had started off, and repeated that Kate was quite well. "Indeed," said Mrs. Nickleby, "I don't think she ever was better, since she had the whooping-cough, scarlet-fever, and measles, all at the same time, and that's the fact."

"Is that letter for me?" growled Ralph, pointing to the little packet Mrs. Nickleby held in her hand.

"For you, brother-in-law," replied Mrs. Nickleby, "and I walked all the way up here on purpose to give it you."

"All the way up here!" cried Sir Mulberry, seizing upon the chance of discovering where Mrs. Nickleby had come from. "What a confounded distance! How far do you call it now?"

"How far do I call it?" said Mrs. Nickleby. "Let me see. It's just a mile from our door to the Old Bailey."

"No, no. Not so much as that," urged Sir Mulberry.

"Oh! It is indeed," said Mrs. Nickleby. "I appeal to his lordship."

"I should decidedly say it was a mile," remarked Lord Frederick, with a solemn aspect.

"It must be; it can't be a yard less," said Mrs. Nickleby. "All down Newgate Street, all down Cheapside, all up Lombard Street, down Gracechurch Street, and along Thames Street, as far as Spigwiffin's Wharf. Oh! It's a mile."

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"Yes, on second thoughts I should say it was," replied Sir Mulberry. "But you don't surely mean to walk all the way back?"

"Oh, no," rejoined Mrs. Nickleby. "I shall go back in an omnibus. I didn't travel about in omnibuses, when my poor dear Nicholas was alive, brother-in-law. But as it is, you know —"

"Yes, yes," replied Ralph impatiently, "and you had better get back before dark."

"Thank you, brother-in-law, so I had," returned Mrs. Nickleby. "I think I had better say good-by, at once."

"Not stop and — rest?" said Ralph, who seldom offered refreshments unless something was to be got by it.

"Oh, dear me, no," returned Mrs. Nickleby, glancing at the dial.

"Lord Frederick," said Sir Mulberry, "we are going Mrs. Nickleby's way. We'll see her safe to the omnibus?"

"By all means. Ye-es."

"Oh! I really couldn't think of it!" said Mrs. Nickleby.

But Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Verisopht were peremptory in their politeness, and leaving Ralph, who seemed to think, not unwisely, that he looked less ridiculous as a mere spectator, than he would have done if he had taken any part in these proceedings, they quitted the house with Mrs. Nickleby between them; that good lady in a perfect ecstasy of satisfaction, no less with the attentions shown her by two titled gentlemen, than with the conviction that Kate might now pick and choose, at least between two large fortunes, and most unexceptionable husbands.

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As she was carried away for the moment by an irresistible train of thought, all connected with her daughter's future greatness, Sir Mulberry Hawk and his friend exchanged glances over the top of the bonnet which the poor lady so much regretted not having left at home, and proceeded to dilate with great rapture, but much respect, on the manifold perfections of Miss Nickleby.

"What a delight, what a comfort, what a happiness, this amiable creature must be to you," said Sir Mulberry, throwing into his voice an indication of the warmest feeling.

"She is indeed, sir," replied Mrs. Nickleby; "she is the sweetest-tempered, kindest-hearted creature — and so clever!"

"She looks clayver," said Lord Verisopht, with the air of a judge of cleverness.

"I assure you she is, my lord," returned Mrs. Nickleby. "When she was at school in Devonshire, she was universally allowed to be beyond all exception the very cleverest girl there, and there were a great many very clever ones too, and that's the truth — twenty-five young ladies, fifty guineas a year without the et-ceteras, both the Miss Dowdles the most accomplished, elegant, fascinating creatures — Oh, dear me!" said Mrs. Nickleby, "I never shall forget what pleasure she used to give me and her poor dear papa, when she was at that school, never — such a delightful letter every half-year, telling us that she was the first pupil in the whole establishment, and had made more progress than anybody else! I can scarcely bear to think of it even now. The girls wrote all the letters themselves," added Mrs. Nickleby, "and the writing-master touched

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them up afterwards with a magnifying glass and a silver pen; at least I think they wrote them, though Kate was never quite certain about that, because she didn't know the handwriting of hers again; but any way, I know it was a circular which they all copied, and of course it was a very gratifying thing —very gratifying."

With similar recollections Mrs. Nickleby beguiled the tediousness of the way, until they reached the omnibus, which the extreme politeness of her new friends would not allow them to leave until it actually started, when they took their hats, as Mrs. Nickleby solemnly assured her hearers on many subsequent occasions, "completely off," and kissed their straw-colored kid gloves till they were no longer visible.

Mrs. Nickleby leaned back in the furthest corner of the conveyance, and, closing her eyes, resigned herself to a host of most pleasing meditations. Kate had never said a word about having met either of these gentlemen; "that," she thought, "argues that she is strongly prepossessed in favor of one of them." Then the question arose, which one could it be. The lord was the youngest, and his title was certainly the grandest; still Kate was not the girl to be swayed by such considerations as these. "I will never put any constraint upon her inclinations," said Mrs. Nickleby to herself; "but upon my word I think there's no comparison between his lordship and Sir Mulberry — Sir Mulberry is such an attentive gentlemanly creature, so much manner, such a fine man, and has so much to say for himself. I hope it's Sir Mulberry — I think it must be Sir Mulberry!" And then her thoughts flew back

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to her old predictions, and the number of times she had said, that Kate with no fortune would marry better than other people's daughters with thousands; and, as she pictured with the brightness of a mother's fancy all the beauty and grace of the poor girl who had struggled so cheerfully with her new life of hardship and trial, her heart grew too full, and the tears trickled down her face.

Meanwhile, Ralph walked to and fro in his little back-office, troubled in mind by what had just occurred. To say that Ralph loved or cared for — in the most ordinary acceptation of those terms — any one of God's creatures, would be the wildest fiction. Still, there had somehow stolen upon him from time to time a thought of his niece which was tinged with compassion and pity; breaking through the dull cloud of dislike or indifference which darkened men and women in his eyes, there was, in her case, the faintest gleam of light — a most feeble and sickly ray at the best of times — but there it was, and it showed the poor girl in a better and purer aspect than any in which he had looked on human nature yet.

"I wish," thought Ralph, "I had never done this. And yet it will keep this boy to me, while there is money to be made. Selling a girl — throwing her in the way of temptation, and insult, and coarse speech. Nearly two thousand pounds profit from him already, though. Pshaw! match-making mothers do the same thing every day."

He sat down, and told the chances, for and against, on his fingers.

"If I had not put them in the right track to-day," thought Ralph, "this foolish woman would have

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done so. Well. If her daughter is as true to herself as she should be from what I have seen, what harm ensues? A little teasing, a little humbling, a few tears. Yes," said Ralph, aloud, as he locked his iron safe. "She must take her chance. She must take her chance."

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CHAPTER VI.

MRS. NICKLEBY BECOMES ACQUAINTED WITH MESSRS. PYKE AND PLUCK, WHOSE AFFECTION AND INTEREST ARE BEYOND ALL BOUNDS.

MRS. NICKLEBY had not felt so proud and important for many a day, as when, on reaching home, she gave herself wholly up to the pleasant visions which had accompanied her on her way thither. Lady Mulberry Hawk — that was the prevalent idea. Lady Mulberry Hawk! — On Tuesday last, at St. George's, Hanover Square, by the Right Reverend the Bishop of Llandaff, Sir Mulberry Hawk, of Mulberry Castle, North Wales, to Catherine, only daughter of the late Nicholas Nickleby, Esquire, of Devonshire. "Upon my word!" cried Mrs. Nicholas Nickleby, "it sounds very well."

Having despatched the ceremony, with its attendant festivities, to the perfect satisfaction of her own mind, the sanguine mother pictured to her imagination a long train of honors and distinctions which could not fail to accompany Kate in her new and brilliant sphere. She would be presented at court, of course. On the anniversary of her birthday, which was upon the nineteenth of July ("at ten minutes past three o'clock in the morning," thought

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Mrs. Nickleby in a parenthesis, "for I recollect asking what o'clock it was"), Sir Mulberry would give a great feast to all his tenants, and would return them three and a half per cent on the amount of their last half-year's rent, as would be fully described and recorded in the fashionable intelligence, to the immeasurable delight and admiration of all the readers thereof. Kate's picture, too, would be in at least half a dozen of the annuals, and on the opposite page would appear, in delicate type, "Lines on contemplating the Portrait of Lady Mulberry Hawk. By Sir Dingleby Dabber." Perhaps some one annual, of more comprehensive design than its fellows, might even contain a portrait of the mother of Lady Mulberry Hawk, with lines by the father of Sir Dingleby Dabber. More unlikely things had come to pass. Less interesting portraits had appeared. As this thought occurred to the good lady, her countenance unconsciously assumed that compound expression of simpering and sleepiness which, being common to all such portraits, is perhaps one reason why they are always so charming and agreeable.

With such triumphs of aërial architecture did Mrs. Nickleby occupy the whole evening after her accidental introduction to Ralph's titled friends; and dreams, no less prophetic and equally promising, haunted her sleep that night. She was preparing for her frugal dinner next day, still occupied with the same ideas — a little softened down perhaps by sleep and daylight — when the girl who attended her, partly for company, and partly to assist in the household affairs, rushed into the room in unwonted agitation, and announced that

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two gentlemen were waiting in the passage for permission to walk upstairs.

"Bless my heart!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, hastily arranging her cap and front, "if it should be — dear me, standing in the passage all this time — why don't you go and ask them to walk up, you stupid thing?"

While the girl was gone on this errand, Mrs. Nickleby hastily swept into a cupboard all vestiges of eating and drinking; which she had scarcely done, and seated herself with looks as collected as she could assume, when two gentlemen, both perfect strangers, presented themselves.

"How do you *do?*" said one gentleman, laying great stress on the last word of the inquiry.

"*How* do you do?" said the other gentleman, altering the emphasis, as if to give variety to the salutation.

Mrs. Nickleby courtesied and smiled, and courtesied again, and remarked, rubbing her hands as she did so, that she hadn't the — really — the honor to —

"To know us," said the first gentleman. "The loss has been ours, Mrs. Nickleby. Has the loss been ours, Pyke?"

"It has, Pluck," answered the other gentleman.

"We have regretted it very often, I believe, Pyke?" said the first gentleman.

"Very often, Pluck," answered the second.

"But now," said the first gentleman, "now we have the happiness we have pined and languished for. Have we pined and languished for this happiness, Pyke, or have we not?"

"You know we have, Pluck," said Pyke reproachfully.

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"You hear him, ma'am?" said Mr. Pluck, looking round; "you hear the unimpeachable testimony of my friend Pyke — that reminds me, — formalities, formalities, must not be neglected in civilized society. Pyke — Mrs. Nickleby."

Mr. Pyke laid his hand upon his heart, and bowed low.

"Whether I shall introduce myself with the same formality," said Mr. Pluck — "whether I shall say myself that my name is Pluck, or whether I shall ask my friend Pyke (who, being now regularly introduced, is competent to the office) to state for me, Mrs. Nickleby, that my name is Pluck; whether I shall claim your acquaintance on the plain ground of the strong interest I take in your welfare, or whether I shall make myself known to you as the friend of Sir Mulberry Hawk — these, Mrs. Nickleby, are considerations which I leave to you to determine."

"Any friend of Sir Mulberry Hawk's requires no better introduction to me," observed Mrs. Nickleby graciously.

"It is delightful to hear you say so," said Mr. Pluck, drawing a chair close to Mrs. Nickleby, and sitting himself down. "It is refreshing to know that you hold my excellent friend, Sir Mulberry, in such high esteem. A word in your ear, Mrs. Nickleby. When Sir Mulberry knows it, he will be a happy man — I say, Mrs. Nickleby, a happy man. Pyke, be seated."

"*My* good opinion," said Mrs. Nickleby, and the poor lady exulted in the idea that she was marvellously sly, — "my good opinion can be of very little consequence to a gentleman like Sir Mulberry."

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"Of little consequence!" exclaimed Mr. Pluck. "Pyke, of what consequence to our friend, Sir Mulberry, is the good opinion of Mrs. Nickleby?"

"Of what consequence?" echoed Pyke.

"Ay," repeated Pluck; "is it of the greatest consequence?"

"Of the very greatest consequence," replied Pyke.

"Mrs. Nickleby cannot be ignorant," said Mr. Pluck, "of the immense impression which that sweet girl has—"

"Pluck!" said his friend, "beware!"

"Pyke is right," muttered Mr. Pluck, after a short pause; "I was not to mention it. Pyke is very right. Thank you, Pyke."

"Well, now, really," thought Mrs. Nickleby within herself. "Such delicacy as that, I never saw!"

Mr. Pluck, after feigning to be in a condition of great embarrassment for some minutes, resumed the conversation by entreating Mrs. Nickleby to take no heed of what he had inadvertently said—to consider him imprudent, rash, injudicious. The only stipulation he would make in his own favor was, that she should give him credit for the best intentions.

"But when," said Mr. Pluck, "when I see so much sweetness and beauty on the one hand, and so much ardor and devotion on the other, I—pardon me, Pyke, I didn't intend to resume that theme. Change the subject, Pyke."

"We promised Sir Mulberry and Lord Frederick," said Pyke, "that we'd call this morning and inquire whether you took any cold last night."

"Not the least in the world last night, sir," replied Mrs. Nickleby, "with many thanks to his lordship and Sir Mulberry for doing me the honor to

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inquire; not the least — which is the more singular as I really am very subject to colds, indeed — very subject. I had a cold once," said Mrs. Nickleby, "I think it was in the year eighteen hundred and seventeen; let me see, four and five are nine, and — yes, eighteen hundred and seventeen, that I thought I never should get rid of; actually and seriously, that I thought I never should get rid of. I was only cured at last by a remedy that I don't know whether you ever happened to hear of, Mr. Pluck. You have a gallon of water as hot as you can possibly bear it, with a pound of salt and six-pen'orth of the finest bran, and sit with your head in it for twenty minutes every night just before going to bed; at least, I don't mean your head — your feet. It's a most extraordinary cure — a most extraordinary cure. I used it for the first time, I recollect, the day after Christmas Day, and by the middle of April following the cold was gone. It seems quite a miracle when you come to think of it, for I had it ever since the beginning of September."

"What an afflicting calamity!" said Mr. Pyke.

"Perfectly horrid!" exclaimed Mr. Pluck.

"But it's worth the pain of hearing, only to know that Mrs. Nickleby recovered it, isn't it, Pluck?" cried Mr. Pyke.

"That is the circumstance which gives it such a thrilling interest," replied Mr. Pluck.

"But come," said Pyke, as if suddenly recollecting himself; "we must not forget our mission in the pleasure of this interview. We come on a mission, Mrs. Nickleby."

"On a mission," exclaimed that good lady, to

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whose mind a definite proposal of marriage for Kate at once presented itself in lively colors.

"From Sir Mulberry," replied Pyke. "You must be very dull here."

"Rather dull, I confess," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"We bring the compliments of Sir Mulberry Hawk, and a thousand entreaties that you'll take a seat in a private box at the play to-night," said Mr. Pluck.

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Nickleby, "I never go out at all, never."

"And that is the very reason, my dear Mrs. Nickleby, why you should go out to-night," retorted Mr. Pluck. "Pyke, entreat Mrs. Nickleby."

"Oh, pray do," said Pyke.

"You positively must," urged Pluck.

"You are very kind," said Mrs. Nickleby, hesitating; "but—"

"There's not a but in the case, my dear Mrs. Nickleby," remonstrated Mr. Pluck; "not such a word in the vocabulary. Your brother-in-law joins us, Lord Frederick joins us, Sir Mulberry joins us, Pyke joins us—a refusal is out of the question. Sir Mulberry sends a carriage for you—twenty minutes before seven to the moment—you'll not be so cruel as to disappoint the whole party, Mrs. Nickleby?"

"You are so very pressing, that I scarcely know what to say," replied the worthy lady.

"Say nothing; not a word, not a word, my dearest madam," urged Mr. Pluck. "Mrs. Nickleby," said that excellent gentleman, lowering his voice, "there is the most trifling, the most excusable breach of confidence in what I am about to say;

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Affectionate behaviour of Mess.rs Pyke & Pluck

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and yet if my friend Pyke there overheard it — such is that man's delicate sense of honor, Mrs. Nickleby — he'd have me out before dinner-time."

Mrs. Nickleby cast an apprehensive glance at the warlike Pyke, who had walked to the window; and Mr. Pluck, squeezing her hand, went on, —

"Your daughter has made a conquest — a conquest on which I may congratulate you. Sir Mulberry, my dear ma'am, Sir Mulberry is her devoted slave. Hem!"

"Hah!" cried Mr. Pyke at this juncture, snatching something from the chimney-piece with a theatrical air. "What is this! what do I behold!"

"What *do* you behold, my dear fellow?" asked Mr. Pluck.

"It is the face, the countenance, the expression," cried Mr. Pyke, falling into his chair with a miniature in his hand; "feebly portrayed, imperfectly caught, but still *the* face, *the* countenance, *the* expression."

"I recognize it at this distance!" exclaimed Mr. Pluck in a fit of enthusiasm. "Is it not, my dear madam, the faint similitude of —"

"It is my daughter's portrait," said Mrs. Nickleby, with great pride. And so it was. And little Miss La Creevy had brought it home for inspection only two nights before.

Mr. Pyke no sooner ascertained that he was quite right in his conjecture, than he launched into the most extravagant encomiums of the divine original; and in the warmth of his enthusiasm kissed the picture a thousand times, while Mr. Pluck pressed Mrs. Nickleby's hand to his heart, and congratulated her on the possession of such a daughter, with so much

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earnestness and affection, that the tears stood, or seemed to stand, in his eyes. Poor Mrs. Nickleby, who had listened in a state of enviable complacency at first, became at length quite overpowered by these tokens of regard for and attachment to the family; and even the servant girl, who had peeped in at the door, remained rooted to the spot in astonishment at the ecstasies of the two friendly visitors.

By degrees these raptures subsided, and Mrs. Nickleby went on to entertain her guests with a lament over her fallen fortunes, and a picturesque account of her old house in the country: comprising a full description of the different apartments, not forgetting the little store-room, and a lively recollection of how many steps you went down to get into the garden, and which way you turned when you came out at the parlor door, and what capital fixtures there were in the kitchen. This last reflection naturally conducted her into the wash-house, where she stumbled upon the brewing utensils, among which she might have wandered for an hour, if the mere mention of those implements had not, by an association of ideas, instantly reminded Mr. Pyke that he was "amazing thirsty."

"And I'll tell you what," said Mr. Pyke, "if you'll send round to the public-house for a pot of mild half-and-half, positively and actually I'll drink it."

And positively and actually Mr. Pyke *did* drink it, and Mr. Pluck helped him, while Mrs. Nickleby looked on in divided admiration of the condescension of the two, and the aptitude with which they accommodated themselves to the pewter pot; in explanation of which seeming marvel it may be

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here observed, that gentlemen who, like Messrs. Pyke and Pluck, live upon their wits (or not so much, perhaps, upon the presence of their own wits as upon the absence of wits in other people) are occasionally reduced to very narrow shifts and straits, and are at such periods accustomed to regale themselves in a very simple and primitive manner.

"At twenty minutes before seven, then," said Mr. Pyke, rising, "the coach will be here. One more look — one little look — at that sweet face. Ah! here it is. Unmoved, unchanged!" This, by the way, was a very remarkable circumstance, miniatures being liable to so many changes of expression —"Oh, Pluck! Pluck!"

Mr. Pluck made no other reply than kissing Mrs. Nickleby's hand with a great show of feeling and attachment; Mr. Pyke having done the same, both gentlemen hastily withdrew.

Mrs. Nickleby was commonly in the habit of giving herself credit for a pretty tolerable share of penetration and acuteness, but she had never felt so satisfied with her own sharp-sightedness as she did that day. She had found it all out the night before. She had never seen Sir Mulberry and Kate together — never even heard Sir Mulberry's name — and yet hadn't she said to herself from the very first, that she saw how the case stood? and what a triumph it was, for there was now no doubt about it. If these flattering attentions to herself were not sufficient proofs, Sir Mulberry's confidential friend had suffered the secret to escape him in so many words. "I am quite in love with that dear Mr. Pluck, I declare I am," said Mrs. Nickleby.

There was one great source of uneasiness in the

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midst of this good-fortune, and that was the having nobody by, to whom she could confide it. Once or twice she almost resolved to walk straight to Miss La Creevy's and tell it all to her. "But I don't know," thought Mrs. Nickleby; "she is a very worthy person, but I am afraid too much beneath Sir Mulberry's station for us to make a companion of. Poor thing!" Acting upon this grave consideration she rejected the idea of taking the little portrait-painter into her confidence, and contented herself with holding out sundry vague and mysterious hopes of preferment to the servant girl, who received these obscure hints of dawning greatness with much veneration and respect.

Punctual to its time came the promised vehicle, which was no hackney coach, but a private chariot, having behind it a footman, whose legs, although somewhat large for his body, might, as mere abstract legs, have set themselves up for models at the Royal Academy. It was quite exhilarating to hear the clash and bustle with which he banged the door and jumped up behind after Mrs. Nickleby was in; and as that good lady was perfectly unconscious that he applied the gold-headed end of his long stick to his nose, and so telegraphed most disrespectfully to the coachman over her very head, she sat in a state of much stiffness and dignity, not a little proud of her position.

At the theatre entrance there was more banging and more bustle, and there were also Messrs. Pyke and Pluck waiting to escort her to her box; and so polite were they, that Mr. Pyke threatened with many oaths to "smifligate" a very old man with a lantern who accidentally stumbled in her way — to

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the great terror of Mrs. Nickleby, who, conjecturing more from Mr. Pyke's excitement than any previous acquaintance with the etymology of the word that smifligation and bloodshed must be in the main one and the same thing, was alarmed beyond expression, lest something should occur. Fortunately, however, Mr. Pyke confined himself to mere verbal smifligation, and they reached their box with no more serious interruption by the way, than a desire on the part of the same pugnacious gentleman to "smash" the assistant box-keeper for happening to mistake the number.

Mrs. Nickleby had scarcely been put away behind the curtain of the box in an armchair, when Sir Mulberry and Lord Verisopht arrived, arrayed from the crowns of their heads to the tips of their gloves, and from the tips of their gloves to the toes of their boots, in the most elegant and costly manner. Sir Mulberry was a little hoarser than on the previous day, and Lord Verisopht looked rather sleepy and queer; from which tokens, as well as from the circumstance of their both being to a trifling extent unsteady upon their legs, Mrs. Nickleby justly concluded that they had taken dinner.

"We have been — we have been — toasting your lovely daughter, Mrs. Nickleby," whispered Sir Mulberry, sitting down behind her.

"Oh, ho!" thought that knowing lady; "wine in, truth out. — You are very kind, Sir Mulberry."

"No, no, upon my soul!" replied Sir Mulberry Hawk. "It's you that's kind, upon my soul it is. It was so kind of you to come to-night."

"So very kind of you to invite me, you mean, Sir Mulberry," replied Mrs. Nickleby, tossing her head, and looking prodigiously sly.

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"I am so anxious to know you, so anxious to cultivate your good opinion, so desirous that there should be a delicious kind of harmonious family understanding between us," said Sir Mulberry, "that you mustn't think I'm disinterested in what I do. I'm infernal selfish; I am — upon my soul I am."

"I am sure you can't be selfish, Sir Mulberry!" replied Mrs. Nickleby. "You have much too open and generous a countenance for that."

"What an extraordinary observer you are!" said Sir Mulberry Hawk.

"Oh, no, indeed, I don't see very far into things, Sir Mulberry," replied Mrs. Nickleby, in a tone of voice which left the baronet to infer that she saw very far indeed.

"I am quite afraid of you," said the baronet. "Upon my soul," repeated Sir Mulberry, looking round to his companions; "I am afraid of Mrs. Nickleby. She is so immensely sharp."

Messrs. Pyke and Pluck shook their heads mysteriously, and observed together that they had found that out long ago; upon which Mrs. Nickleby tittered, and Sir Mulberry laughed, and Pyke and Pluck roared.

"But where's my brother-in-law, Sir Mulberry?" inquired Mrs. Nickleby. "I shouldn't be here without him. I hope he's coming."

"Pyke," said Sir Mulberry, taking out his toothpick and lolling back in his chair, as if he were too lazy to invent a reply to this question. "Where's Ralph Nickleby?"

"Pluck," said Pyke, imitating the baronet's action, and turning the lie over to his friend, "where's Ralph Nickleby?"

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Mr. Pluck was about to return some evasive reply, when the bustle caused by a party entering the next box seemed to attract the attention of all four gentlemen, who exchanged glances of much meaning. The new party beginning to converse together, Sir Mulberry suddenly assumed the character of a most attentive listener, and implored his friends not to breathe — not to breathe.

"Why not?" said Mrs. Nickleby. "What is the matter?"

"Hush!" replied Sir Mulberry, laying his hand on her arm. "Lord Frederick, do you recognize the tones of that voice?"

"Deyvle take me if I didn't think it was the voice of Miss Nickleby."

"Lor, my lord!" cried Miss Nickleby's mamma, thrusting her head round the curtain. "Why, actually — Kate, my dear, Kate."

"*You* here, mamma! Is it possible!"

"Possible, my dear? Yes."

"Why, who — who on earth is that you have with you, mamma?" said Kate, shrinking back as she caught sight of a man smiling and kissing his hand.

"Who do you suppose, my dear?" replied Mrs. Nickleby, bending towards Mrs. Wititterly, and speaking a little louder for that lady's edification. "There's Mr. Pyke, Mr. Pluck, Sir Mulberry Hawk, and Lord Frederick Verisopht."

"Gracious Heaven!" thought Kate hurriedly. "How comes she in such society?"

Now, Kate thought thus *so* hurriedly, and the surprise was so great, and moreover brought back so forcibly the recollection of what had passed at Ralph's delectable dinner, that she turned extremely

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pale and appeared greatly agitated, which symptoms being observed by Mrs. Nickleby, were at once set down by that acute lady as being caused and occasioned by violent love. But, although she was in no small degree delighted by this discovery, which reflected so much credit on her own quickness of perception, it did not lessen her motherly anxiety in Kate's behalf; and accordingly, with a vast quantity of trepidation, she quitted her own box to hasten into that of Mrs. Wititterly. Mrs. Wititterly, keenly alive to the glory of having a lord and a baronet among her visiting acquaintance, lost no time in signing to Mr. Wititterly to open the door, and thus it was that in less than thirty seconds Mrs. Nickleby's party had made an irruption into Mrs. Wititterly's box, which it filled to the very door, there being in fact only room for Messrs. Pyke and Pluck to get in their heads and waistcoats.

"My dear Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby, kissing her daughter affectionately. "How ill you looked a moment ago! You quite frightened me, I declare!"

"It was mere fancy, mamma, — the — the — reflection of the lights perhaps," replied Kate, glancing nervously round, and finding it impossible to whisper any caution or explanation.

"Don't you see Sir Mulberry Hawk, my dear?"

Kate bowed slightly, and, biting her lip, turned her head towards the stage.

But Sir Mulberry Hawk was not to be so easily repulsed, for he advanced with extended hand; and Mrs. Nickleby officiously informing Kate of this circumstance, she was obliged to extend her own. Sir Mulberry detained it while he murmured a pro-

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fusion of compliments, which Kate, remembering what had passed between them, rightly considered as so many aggravations of the insult he had already put upon her. Then followed the recognition of Lord Verisopht, and then the greeting of Mr. Pyke, and then that of Mr. Pluck, and finally, to complete the young lady's mortification, she was compelled at Mrs. Wititterly's request to perform the ceremony of introducing the odious persons, whom she regarded with the utmost indignation and abhorrence.

"Mrs. Wititterly is delighted," said Mr. Wititterly, rubbing his hands; "delighted, my lord, I am sure, with this opportunity of contracting an acquaintance which, I trust, my lord, we shall improve. Julia, my dear, you must not allow yourself to be too much excited, you must not. Indeed you must not. Mrs. Wititterly is of a most excitable nature, Sir Mulberry. The snuff of a candle, the wick of a lamp, the bloom on a peach, the down on a butterfly. You might blow her away, my lord; you might blow her away."

Sir Mulberry seemed to think that it would be a great convenience if the lady could be blown away. He said, however, that the delight was mutual, and Lord Verisopht added that it was mutual, whereupon Messrs. Pyke and Pluck were heard to murmur from the distance that it was very mutual indeed.

"I take an interest, my lord," said Mrs. Wititterly, with a faint smile, "such an interest in the drama."

"Ye-es. It's very interasting," replied Lord Verisopht.

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"I'm always ill after Shakspeare," said Mrs. Wititterly. "I scarcely exist the next day; I find the reaction so very great after a tragedy, my lord, and Shakspeare is such a delicious creature."

"Ye-es!" replied Lord Verisopht. "He was a clayver man."

"Do you know, my lord," said Mrs. Wititterly, after a long silence, "I find I take so much more interest in his plays, after having been to that dear little dull house he was born in! Were you ever there, my lord?"

"No, nayver," replied Verisopht.

"Then really you ought to go, my lord," returned Mrs. Wititterly, in very languid and drawling accents. "I don't know how it is, but after you've seen the place and written your name in the little book, somehow or other you seem to be inspired; it kindles up quite a fire within one."

"Ye-es!" replied Lord Verisopht, "I shall certainly go there."

"Julia, my life," interposed Mr. Wititterly, "you are deceiving his lordship — unintentionally, my lord, she is deceiving you. It is your poetical temperament, my dear — your ethereal soul — your fervid imagination, which throws you into a glow of genius and excitement. There is nothing in the place, my dear — nothing, nothing."

"I think there must be something in the place," said Mrs. Nickleby, who had been listening in silence; "for, soon after I was married, I went to Stratford with my poor dear Mr. Nickleby, in a post-chaise from Birmingham — was it a post-chaise, though?" said Mrs. Nickleby, considering; "yes, it must have been a post-chaise, because I recollect

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remarking at the time that the driver had a green shade over his left eye; — in a post-chaise from Birmingham, and after we had seen Shakspeare's tomb and birthplace, we went back to the inn there, where we slept that night, and I recollect that all night long I dreamed of nothing but a black gentleman, at full length, in plaster-of-Paris, with a lay-down collar tied with two tassels, leaning against a post and thinking; and when I woke in the morning and described him to Mr. Nickleby, he said it was Shakspeare just as he had been when he was alive, which was very curious indeed. Stratford — Stratford," continued Mrs. Nickleby, considering. "Yes, I am positive about that, because I recollect I was in the family way with my son Nicholas at the time, and I had been very much frightened by an Italian image boy that very morning. In fact, it was quite a mercy, ma'am," added Mrs. Nickleby, in a whisper to Mrs. Wititterly, "that my son didn't turn out to be a Shakspeare, and what a dreadful thing that would have been!"

When Mrs. Nickleby had brought this interesting anecdote to a close, Pyke and Pluck, ever zealous in their patron's cause, proposed the adjournment of a detachment of the party into the next box; and with so much skill were the preliminaries adjusted, that Kate, despite all she could say or do to the contrary, had no alternative but to suffer herself to be led away by Sir Mulberry Hawk. Her mother and Mr. Pluck accompanied them, but the worthy lady, pluming herself upon her discretion, took particular care not so much as to look at her daughter during the whole evening, and to seem wholly absorbed in the jokes and conversation of Mr.

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Pluck, who, having been appointed sentry over Mrs. Nickleby for that especial purpose, neglected, on his side, no possible opportunity of engrossing her attention.

Lord Frederick Verisopht remained in the next box to be talked to by Mrs. Wititterly, and Mr. Pyke was in attendance to throw in a word or two when necessary. As to Mr. Wititterly, he was sufficiently busy in the body of the house, informing such of his friends and acquaintance as happened to be there, that those two gentlemen upstairs whom they had seen in conversation with Mrs. W., were the distinguished Lord Frederick Verisopht and his most intimate friend, the gay Sir Mulberry Hawk — a communication which inflamed several respectable housekeepers with the utmost jealousy and rage, and reduced sixteen unmarried daughters to the very brink of despair.

The evening came to an end at last, but Kate had yet to be handed downstairs by the detested Sir Mulberry; and so skilfully were the manœuvres of Messrs. Pyke and Pluck conducted, that she and the baronet were the last of the party, and were even — without an appearance of effort or design — left at some little distance behind.

"Don't hurry, don't hurry," said Sir Mulberry, as Kate hastened on, and attempted to release her arm.

She made no reply, but still pressed forward.

"Nay, then —" coolly observed Sir Mulberry, stopping her outright.

"You had best not seek to detain me, sir!" said Kate angrily.

"And why not?" retorted Sir Mulberry. "My dear creature, now, why do you keep up this show of displeasure?"

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"*Show!*" repeated Kate indignantly. "How dare you presume to speak to me, sir — to address me — to come into my presence?"

"You look prettier in a passion, Miss Nickleby," said Sir Mulberry Hawk, stooping down, the better to see her face.

"I hold you in the bitterest detestation and contempt, sir," said Kate. "If you find any attraction in looks of disgust and aversion, you — let me rejoin my friends, sir, instantly. Whatever considerations may have withheld me thus far, I will disregard them all, and take a course that even *you* might feel, if you do not immediately suffer me to proceed."

Sir Mulberry smiled, and still looking in her face and retaining her arm, walked towards the door.

"If no regard for my sex or helpless situation will induce you to desist from this coarse and unmanly persecution," said Kate, scarcely knowing, in the tumult of her passions, what she said, — "I have a brother who will resent it dearly, one day."

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed Sir Mulberry, as though quietly communing with himself; passing his arm round her waist as he spoke, "she looks more beautiful, and I like her better in this mood, than when her eyes are cast down, and she is in perfect repose!"

How Kate reached the lobby where her friends were waiting she never knew, but she hurried across it without at all regarding them, and disengaged herself suddenly from her companion, sprang into the coach, and, throwing herself into its darkest corner, burst into tears.

Messrs. Pyke and Pluck, knowing their cue, at

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once threw the party into great commotion by shouting for the carriages, and getting up a violent quarrel with sundry inoffensive bystanders; in the midst of which tumult they put the affrighted Mrs. Nickleby in her chariot, and having got her safely off, turned their thoughts to Mrs. Wititterly, whose attention also they had now effectually distracted from the young lady, by throwing her into a state of the utmost bewilderment and consternation. At length, the conveyance in which she had come rolled off too with its load, and the four worthies, being left alone under the portico, enjoyed a hearty laugh together.

"There," said Sir Mulberry, turning to his noble friend. "Didn't I tell you last night that if we could find where they were going by bribing a servant through my fellow, and then established ourselves close by with the mother, these people's honor would be our own? Why, here it is, done in four and twenty hours."

"Ye-es," replied the dupe. "But I have been tied to the old woman all ni-ight."

"Hear him," said Sir Mulberry, turning to his two friends. "Hear this discontented grumbler. Isn't it enough to make a man swear never to help him in his plots and schemes again? Isn't it an infernal shame?"

Pyke asked Pluck whether it was not an infernal shame, and Pluck asked Pyke; but neither answered.

"Isn't it the truth?" demanded Verisopht. "Wasn't it so?"

"Wasn't it so!" repeated Sir Mulberry. "How would you have had it? How could we have got a

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general invitation at first sight — come when you like, go when you like, stop as long as you like, do what you like — if you, the lord, had not made yourself agreeable to the foolish mistress of the house? Do *I* care for this girl, except as your friend? Haven't I been sounding your praises in her ears, and bearing her pretty sulks and peevishness all night for you? What sort of stuff do you think I'm made of? Would I do this for every man? Don't I deserve even gratitude in return?"

"You're a deyvlish good fellow," said the poor young lord, taking his friend's arm. "Upon my life you're a deyvlish good fellow, Hawk."

"And I have done right, have I?" demanded Sir Mulberry.

"Quite ri-ght."

"And like a poor, silly, good-natured, friendly dog as I am, eh?"

"Ye-es, ye-es — like a friend," replied the other.

"Well, then," replied Sir Mulberry, "I'm satisfied. And now let's go and have our revenge on the German baron and the Frenchman, who cleaned you out so handsomely last night."

With these words the friendly creature took his companion's arm and led him away, turning half round as he did so, and bestowing a wink and a contemptuous smile on Messrs. Pyke and Pluck, who, cramming their handkerchiefs into their mouths to denote their silent enjoyment of the whole proceedings, followed their patron and his victim at a little distance.

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CHAPTER VII.

MISS NICKLEBY, RENDERED DESPERATE BY THE PERSECUTION OF SIR MULBERRY HAWK, AND THE COMPLICATED DIFFICULTIES AND DISTRESSES WHICH SURROUND HER, APPEALS, AS A LAST RESOURCE, TO HER UNCLE FOR PROTECTION.

THE ensuing morning brought reflection with it, as morning usually does; but widely different was the train of thought it awakened in the different persons who had been so unexpectedly brought together on the preceding evening, by the active agency of Messrs. Pyke and Pluck.

The reflections of Sir Mulberry Hawk — if such a term can be applied to the thoughts of the systematic and calculating man of dissipation, whose joys, regrets, pains, and pleasures, are all of self, and who would seem to retain nothing of the intellectual faculty but the power to debase himself, and to degrade the very nature whose outward semblance he wears — the reflections of Sir Mulberry Hawk turned upon Kate Nickleby, and were, in brief, that she was undoubtedly handsome; that her coyness *must* be easily conquerable by a man of his address and experience, and that the pursuit was one which could not fail to redound to his

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credit, and greatly to enhance his reputation with the world. And lest this last consideration — no mean or secondary one with Sir Mulberry — should sound strangely in the ears of some, let it be remembered that most men live in a world of their own, and that in that limited circle alone are they ambitious for distinction and applause. Sir Mulberry's world was peopled with profligates, and he acted accordingly.

Thus, cases of injustice, and oppression, and tyranny, and the most extravagant bigotry, are in constant occurrence among us every day. It is the custom to trumpet forth much wonder and astonishment at the chief actors therein setting at defiance so completely the opinion of the world; but there is no greater fallacy; it is precisely because they do consult the opinion of their own little world that such things take place at all, and strike the great world dumb with amazement.

The reflections of Mrs. Nickleby were of the proudest and most complacent kind; and under the influence of her very agreeable delusion she straightway sat down and indited a long letter to Kate, in which she expressed her entire approval of the admirable choice she had made, and extolled Sir Mulberry to the skies; asserting, for the more complete satisfaction of her daughter's feelings, that he was precisely the individual whom she (Mrs. Nickleby) would have chosen for her son-in-law, if she had had the picking and choosing from all mankind. The good lady then, with the preliminary observation that she might be fairly supposed not to have lived in the world so long without knowing its ways, communicated a great many subtle pre-

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cepts applicable to the state of courtship, and confirmed in their wisdom by her own personal experience. Above all things she commended a strict maidenly reserve, as being not only a very laudable thing in itself, but as tending materially to strengthen and increase a lover's ardor. "And I never," added Mrs. Nickleby, "was more delighted in my life than to observe last night, my dear, that your good sense had already told you this." With which sentiment, and various hints of the pleasure she derived from the knowledge that her daughter inherited so large an instalment of her own excellent sense and discretion (to nearly the full measure of which she might hope, with care, to succeed in time), Mrs. Nickleby concluded a very long and rather illegible letter.

Poor Kate was well-nigh distracted on the receipt of four closely written and closely crossed sides of congratulation on the very subject which had prevented her closing her eyes all night, and kept her weeping and watching in her chamber; still worse and more trying was the necessity of rendering herself agreeable to Mrs. Wititterly, who, being in low spirits after the fatigue of the preceding night, of course expected her companion (else wherefore had she board and salary?) to be in the best spirits possible. As to Mr. Wititterly, he went about all day in a tremor of delight at having shaken hands with a lord, and having actually asked him to come and see him in his own house. The lord himself, not being troubled to any inconvenient extent with the power of thinking, regaled himself with the conversation of Messrs. Pyke and Pluck, who sharpened their wit by a plentiful indulgence in various costly stimulants at his expense.

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It was four in the afternoon — that is, the vulgar afternoon of the sun and the clock — and Mrs. Wititterly reclined, according to custom, on the drawing-room sofa, while Kate read aloud a new novel in three volumes, entitled "The Lady Flabella," which Alphonse the doubtful had procured from the library that very morning. And it was a production admirably suited to a lady laboring under Mrs. Wititterly's complaint, seeing that there was not a line it, from beginning to end, which could, by the most remote contingency, awaken the smallest excitement in any person breathing.

Kate read on.

"'Cherizette,' said the Lady Flabella, inserting her mouse-like feet in the blue satin slippers, which had unwittingly occasioned the half-playful half-angry altercation between herself and the youthful Colonel Befillaire, in the Duke of Mincefenille's *salon de danse* on the previous night. '*Cherizette, ma chère, donnez-moi de l'eau-de-Cologne, s'il vous plaît, mon enfant.*'

"'*Mercie* — thank you,' said the Lady Flabella, as the lively but devoted Cherizette plentifully besprinkled with the fragrant compound the Lady Flabella's *mouchoir* of finest cambric, edged with richest lace, and emblazoned at the four corners with the Flabella crest, and gorgeous heraldic bearings of that noble family. '*Mercie* — that will do.'

"At this instant, while the Lady Flabella yet inhaled that delicious fragrance by holding the *mouchoir* to her exquisite, but thoughtfully chiselled nose, the door of the *boudoir* (artfully concealed by rich hangings of silken damask, the hue of Italy's firmament) was thrown open, and with noiseless

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tread two valets-de-chambre, clad in sumptuous liveries of peach-blossom and gold, advanced into the room, followed by a page in *bas de soie* — silk stockings — who, while they remained at some distance making the most graceful obeisances, advanced to the feet of his lovely mistress, and dropping on one knee presented, on a golden salver gorgeously chased, a scented *billet*.

"The Lady Flabella, with an agitation she could not repress, hastily tore off the *envelope* and broke the scented seal. It *was* from Befillaire — the young, the slim, the low-voiced — *her own* Befillaire."

"Oh, charming!" interrupted Kate's patroness, who was sometimes taken literary. "Poetic, really. Read that description again, Miss Nickleby."

Kate complied.

"Sweet, indeed!" said Mrs. Wititterly, with a sigh. "So voluptuous, is it not — so soft?"

"Yes, I think it is," replied Kate gently; "very soft."

"Close the book, Miss Nickleby," said Mrs. Wititterly. "I can hear nothing more to-day; I should be sorry to disturb the impression of that sweet description. Close the book."

Kate complied, not unwillingly; and, as she did so, Mrs. Wititterly raising her glass with a languid hand, remarked, that she looked pale.

"It was the fright of that — that noise and confusion last night," said Kate.

"How very odd!" exclaimed Mrs. Wititterly, with a look of surprise. And certainly, when one comes to think of it, it *was* very odd that anything should have disturbed a companion. A steam-engine,

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or other ingenious piece of mechanism out of order, would have been nothing to it.

"How did you come to know Lord Frederick, and those other delightful creatures, child?" asked Mrs. Wititterly, still eying Kate through her glass.

"I met them at my uncle's," said Kate, vexed to feel that she was coloring deeply, but unable to keep down the blood which rushed to her face whenever she thought of that man.

"Have you known them long?"

"No," rejoined Kate. "Not long."

"I was very glad of the opportunity which that respectable person, your mother, gave us of being known to them," said Mrs. Wititterly, in a lofty manner. "Some friends of ours were on the very point of introducing us, which makes it quite remarkable."

This was said lest Miss Nickleby should grow conceited on the honor and dignity of having known four great people (for Pyke and Pluck were included among the delightful creatures), whom Mrs. Wititterly did not know. But as the circumstance had made no impression one way or other upon Kate's mind, the force of the observation was quite lost upon her.

"They asked permission to call," said Mrs. Wititterly. "I gave it them of course."

"Do you expect them to-day?" Kate ventured to inquire.

Mrs. Wititterly's answer was lost in the noise of a tremendous rapping at the street-door, and before it had ceased to vibrate, there drove up a handsome cabriolet, out of which leaped Sir Mulberry Hawk and his friend Lord Verisopht.

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"They are here now," said Kate, rising and hurrying away.

"Miss Nickleby!" cried Mrs. Wititterly, perfectly aghast at a companion's attempting to quit the room, without her permission first had and obtained. "Pray don't think of going."

"You are very good!" replied Kate. "But—"

"For goodness' sake, don't agitate me by making me speak so much," said Mrs. Wititterly, with great sharpness. "Dear me, Miss Nickleby, I beg—"

It was in vain for Kate to protest that she was unwell, for the footsteps of the knockers, whoever they were, were already on the stairs. She resumed her seat, and had scarcely done so, when the doubtful page darted into the room and announced, Mr. Pyke, and Mr. Pluck, and Lord Verisopht, and Sir Mulberry Hawk, all at one burst.

"The most extraordinary thing in the world," said Mr. Pluck, saluting both ladies with the utmost cordiality; "the most extraordinary thing. As Lord Frederick and Sir Mulberry drove up to the door, Pyke and I had that instant knocked."

"That instant knocked," said Pyke.

"No matter how you came, so that you are here," said Mrs. Wititterly, who, by dint of lying on the same sofa for three years and a half, had got up quite a little pantomime of graceful attitudes, and now threw herself into the most striking of the whole series, to astonish the visitors. "I am delighted, I am sure."

"And how is Miss Nickleby?" said Sir Mulberry Hawk, accosting Kate, in a low voice—not so low, however, but that it reached the ears of Mrs. Wititterly.

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"Why, she complains of suffering from the fright of last night," said the lady. "I am sure I don't wonder at it, for my nerves are quite torn to pieces."

"And yet you look," observed Sir Mulberry, turning round; "and yet you look —"

"Beyond everything," said Mr. Pyke, coming to his patron's assistance. Of course Mr. Pluck said the same.

"I am afraid Sir Mulberry is a flatterer, my lord," said Mrs. Wititterly, turning to that young gentleman, who had been sucking the head of his cane in silence, and staring at Kate.

"Oh, deyvlish!" replied Verisopht. Having given utterance to which remarkable sentiment, he occupied himself as before.

"Neither does Miss Nickleby look the worse," said Sir Mulberry, bending his bold gaze upon her. "She was always handsome, but upon my soul, ma'am, you seem to have imparted some of your own good looks to her besides."

To judge from the glow which suffused the poor girl's countenance after this speech, Mrs. Wititterly might, with some show of reason, have been supposed to have imparted to it some of that artificial bloom which decorated her own. Mrs. Wititterly admitted, though not with the best grace in the world, that Kate *did* look pretty. She began to think, too, that Sir Mulberry was not quite so agreeable a creature as she had at first supposed him; for, although a skilful flatterer is a most delightful companion, if you can keep him all to yourself, his taste becomes very doubtful when he takes to complimenting other people.

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"Pyke," said the watchful Mr. Pluck, observing the effect which the praise of Miss Nickleby had produced.

"Well, Pluck," said Pyke.

"Is there anybody," demanded Mr. Pluck mysteriously, "anybody you know, that Mrs. Wititterly's profile reminds you of?"

"Reminds me of!" answered Pyke. "Of course there is."

"Who do you mean?" said Pluck, in the same mysterious manner. "The D. of B.?"

"The C. of B.," replied Pyke, with the faintest trace of a grin lingering in his countenance. "The beautiful sister is the countess; not the duchess."

"True," said Pluck, "the C. of B. The resemblance is wonderful!"

"Perfectly startling," said Mr. Pyke.

Here was a state of things! Mrs. Wititterly was declared, upon the testimony of two veracious and competent witnesses, to be the very picture of a countess! This was one of the consequences of getting into good society. Why, she might have moved among grovelling people for twenty years, and never heard of it. How could she, indeed? What did *they* know about countesses?

The two gentlemen having, by the greediness with which this little bait was swallowed, tested the extent of Mrs. Wititterly's appetite for adulation, proceeded to administer that commodity in very large doses, thus affording to Sir Mulberry Hawk an opportunity of pestering Miss Nickleby with questions and remarks, to which she was absolutely obliged to make some reply. Meanwhile, Lord Verisopht enjoyed unmolested the full flavor

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of the gold knob at the top of his cane, as he would have done to the end of the interview if Mr. Wititterly had not come home, and caused the conversation to turn to his favorite topic.

"My lord," said Mr. Wititterly, "I am delighted — honored — proud. Be seated again, my lord, pray. I am proud, indeed — most proud."

It was to the secret annoyance of his wife that Mr. Wititterly said all this, for, although she was bursting with pride and arrogance, she would have had the illustrious guests believe that their visit was quite a common occurrence, and that they had lords and baronets to see them every day in the week. But Mr. Wititterly's feelings were beyond the power of suppression.

"It is an honor, indeed!" said Mr. Wititterly. "Julia, my soul, you will suffer for this to-morrow."

"Suffer!" cried Lord Verisopht.

"The reaction, my lord, the reaction," said Mr. Wititterly. "This violent strain upon the nervous system over, my lord, what ensues? A sinking, a depression, a lowness, a lassitude, a debility. My lord, if Sir Tumley Snuffim was to see that delicate creature at this moment, he would not give a — a — *this* for her life." In illustration of which remark, Mr. Wititterly took a pinch of snuff from his box, and jerked it lightly into the air as an emblem of instability.

"Not *that*," said Mr. Wititterly, looking about him with a serious countenance. "Sir Tumley Snuffim would not give that for Mrs. Wititterly's existence."

Mr. Wititterly told this with a kind of sober exultation, as if it were no trifling distinction for a

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man to have a wife in such a desperate state, and Mrs. Wititterly sighed and looked on, as if she felt the honor, but had determined to bear it as meekly as might be.

"Mrs. Wititterly," said her husband, "is Sir Tumley Snuffim's favorite patient. I believe I may venture to say, that Mrs. Wititterly is the first person who took the new medicine which is supposed to have destroyed a family at Kensington Gravel Pits. I believe she was. If I am wrong, Julia, my dear, you will correct me."

"I believe I was," said Mrs. Wititterly, in a faint voice.

As there appeared to be some doubt in the mind of his patron how he could best join in this conversation, the indefatigable Mr. Pyke threw himself into the breach, and, by way of saying something to the point, inquired — with reference to the aforesaid medicine — whether it was nice.

"No, sir, it was not. It had not even that recommendation," said Mr. W.

"Mrs. Wititterly is quite a martyr," observed Pyke, with a complimentary bow.

"I *think* I am," said Mrs. Wititterly, smiling.

"I think you are, my dear Julia," replied her husband, in a tone which seemed to say that he was not vain, but still must insist upon their privileges. "If anybody, my lord," added Mr. Wititterly, wheeling round to the nobleman, "will produce to me a greater martyr than Mrs. Wititterly, all I can say is, that I shall be glad to see that martyr, whether male or female — that's all, my lord."

Pyke and Pluck promptly remarked that certainly nothing could be fairer than that; and the call

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having been by this time protracted to a very great length, they obeyed Sir Mulberry's look, and rose to go. This brought Sir Mulberry himself and Lord Verisopht on their legs also. Many protestations of friendship, and expressions anticipative of the pleasure which must inevitably flow from so happy an acquaintance, were exchanged, and the visitors departed, with renewed assurances that at all times and seasons the mansion of the Wititterlys would be honored by receiving them beneath its roof.

That they came at all times and seasons — that they dined there one day, supped the next, dined again on the next, and were constantly to and fro on all — that they made parties to visit public places, and met by accident at lounges — that upon all these occasions Miss Nickleby was exposed to the constant and unremitting persecution of Sir Mulberry Hawk, who now began to feel his character, even in the estimation of his two dependants, involved in the successful reduction of her pride — that she had no intervals of peace or rest, except at those hours when she could sit in her solitary room, and weep over the trials of the day — all these were consequences naturally flowing from the well-laid plans of Sir Mulberry, and their able execution by the auxiliaries, Pyke and Pluck.

And thus for a fortnight matters went on. That any but the weakest and silliest of people could have seen in one interview that Lord Verisopht, though he was a lord, and Sir Mulberry Hawk, though he was a baronet, were not persons accustomed to be the best possible companions, and were certainly not calculated by habits, manners, tastes,

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or conversation, to shine with any very great lustre in the society of ladies, need scarcely be remarked. But with Mrs. Wititterly the two titles were all-sufficient; coarseness became humor, vulgarity softened itself down into the most charming eccentricity; insolence took the guise of an easy absence of reserve, attainable only by those who had had the good-fortune to mix with high folks.

If the mistress put such a construction upon the behavior of her new friends, what could the companion urge against them? If they accustomed themselves to very little restraint before the lady of the house, with how much more freedom could they address her paid dependant! Nor was even this the worst. As the odious Sir Mulberry Hawk attached himself to Kate with less and less of disguise, Mrs. Wititterly began to grow jealous of the superior attractions of Miss Nickleby. If this feeling had led to her banishment from the drawing-room when such company was there, Kate would have been only too happy and willing that it should have existed, but unfortunately for her she possessed that native grace and true gentility of manner, and those thousand nameless accomplishments which give to female society its greatest charm; if these be valuable anywhere, they were especially so where the lady of the house was a mere animated doll. The consequence was, that Kate had the double mortification of being an indispensable part of the circle when Sir Mulberry and his friends were there, and of being exposed, on that very account, to all Mrs. Wititterly's ill-humors and caprices when they were gone. She became utterly and completely miserable.

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Mrs. Wititterly had never thrown off the mask with regard to Sir Mulberry, but when she was more than usually out of temper, attributed the circumstance, as ladies sometimes do, to nervous indisposition. However, as the dreadful idea that Lord Verisopht also was somewhat taken with Kate, and that she, Mrs. Wititterly, was quite a secondary person, dawned upon that lady's mind and gradually developed itself, she became possessed with a large quantity of highly proper and most virtuous indignation, and felt it her duty, as a married lady and a moral member of society, to mention the circumstance to "the young person" without delay.

Accordingly Mrs. Wititterly broke ground next morning, during a pause in the novel-reading.

"Miss Nickleby," said Mrs. Wititterly, "I wish to speak to you very gravely. I am sorry to have to do it, upon my word I am very sorry, but you leave me no alternative, Miss Nickleby." Here Mrs. Wititterly tossed her head — not passionately, only virtuously — and remarked, with some appearance of excitement, that she feared that palpitation of the heart was coming on again.

"Your behavior, Miss Nickleby," resumed the lady, "is very far from pleasing me — very far. I am very anxious indeed that you should do well, but you may depend upon it, Miss Nickleby, you will not, if you go on as you do."

"Ma'am!" exclaimed Kate proudly.

"Don't agitate me by speaking in that way, Miss Nickleby, don't," said Mrs. Wititterly with some violence, "or you'll compel me to ring the bell."

Kate looked at her, but said nothing.

"You needn't suppose," resumed Mrs. Wititterly,

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"that your looking at me in that way, Miss Nickleby, will prevent my saying what I am going to say, which I feel to be a religious duty. You needn't direct your glances towards me," said Mrs. Wititterly, with a sudden burst of spite; "*I* am not Sir Mulberry, no, nor Lord Frederick Verisopht, Miss Nickleby, nor am I Mr. Pyke, nor Mr. Pluck either."

Kate looked at her again, but less steadily than before; and resting her elbow on the table, covered her eyes with her hand.

"If such things had been done when I was a young girl," said Mrs. Wititterly (this, by the way, must have been some little time before), "I don't suppose anybody would have believed it."

"I don't think they would," murmured Kate. "I do not think anybody would believe, without actually knowing it, what I seem doomed to undergo!"

"Don't talk to me of being doomed to undergo, Miss Nickleby, if you please," said Mrs. Wititterly, with a shrillness of tone quite surprising in so great an invalid. "I will not be answered, Miss Nickleby. I am not accustomed to be answered, nor will I permit it for an instant. Do you hear?" she added, waiting with some apparent inconsistency *for* an answer.

"I do hear you, ma'am," replied Kate, "with surprise — with greater surprise than I can express."

"I have always considered you a particularly well behaved young person for your station in life," said Mrs. Wititterly; "and as you are a person of healthy appearance, and neat in your dress and so

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forth, I have taken an interest in you, as I do still, considering that I owe a sort of duty to that respectable old female, your mother. For these reasons, Miss Nickleby, I must tell you once for all, and begging you to mind what I say, that I must insist upon your immediately altering your very forward behavior to the gentlemen who visit at this house. It really is not becoming," said Mrs. Wititterly, closing her chaste eyes as she spoke; "it is improper — quite improper."

"Oh!" cried Kate, looking upwards and clasping her hands; "is not this, is not this, too cruel, too hard to bear! Is it not enough that I should have suffered as I have, night and day; that I should almost have sunk in my own estimation from very shame of having been brought into contact with such people; but must I also be exposed to this unjust and most unfounded charge!"

"You will have the goodness to recollect, Miss Nickleby," said Mrs. Wititterly, "that when you use such terms as 'unjust,' and 'unfounded,' you charge me, in effect, with stating that which is untrue."

"I do," said Kate, with honest indignation. "Whether you make this accusation of yourself, or at the prompting of others, is alike to me. I say it *is* vilely, grossly, wilfully untrue. Is it possible!" cried Kate, "that any one of my own sex can have sat by, and not have seen the misery these men have caused me? Is it possible that you, ma'am, can have been present, and failed to mark the insulting freedom that their every look bespoke? Is it possible that you can have avoided seeing, that these libertines, in their utter disrespect for you,

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and utter disregard of all gentlemanly behavior, and almost of decency, have had but one object in introducing themselves here, and that the furtherance of their designs upon a friendless, helpless girl, who, without this humiliating confession, might have hoped to receive from one so much her senior, something like womanly aid and sympathy? I do not — I cannot believe it!"

If poor Kate had possessed the slightest knowledge of the world, she certainly would not have ventured, even in the excitement into which she had been lashed, upon such an injudicious speech as this. Its effect was precisely what a more experienced observer would have foreseen. Mrs. Wititterly received the attack upon her veracity with exemplary calmness, and listened with the most heroic fortitude to Kate's account of her own sufferings. But allusion being made to her being held in disregard by the gentlemen, she evinced violent emotion, and this blow was no sooner followed up by the remark concerning her seniority, than she fell back upon the sofa, uttering dismal screams.

"What is the matter?" cried Mr. Wititterly, bouncing into the room. "Heavens, what do I see? Julia! Julia! look up, my life, look up!"

But Julia looked down most perseveringly, and screamed still louder; so Mr. Wititterly rang the bell, and danced in a frenzied manner round the sofa on which Mrs. Wititterly lay; uttering perpetual cries for Sir Tumley Snuffim, and never once leaving off to ask for any explanation of the scene before him.

"Run for Sir Tumley," cried Mr. Wititterly, menacing the page with both fists. "I knew it,

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Miss Nickleby," he said, looking round with an air of melancholy triumph, "that society has been too much for her. This is all soul, you know, every bit of it." With this assurance Mr. Wititterly took up the prostrate form of Mrs. Wititterly, and carried her bodily off to bed.

Kate waited until Sir Tumley Snuffim had paid his visit and looked in with a report, that, through the special interposition of a merciful Providence (thus spake Sir Tumley), Mrs. Wititterly had gone to sleep. She then hastily attired herself for walking, and leaving word that she should return within a couple of hours, hurried away towards her uncle's house.

It had been a good day with Ralph Nickleby — quite a lucky day; and as he walked to and fro in his little back-room with his hands clasped behind him, adding up in his own mind all the sums that had been, or would be, netted from the business done since morning, his mouth was drawn into a hard stern smile; while the firmness of the lines and curves that made it up, as well as the cunning glance of his cold, bright eye, seemed to tell, that if any resolution or cunning would increase the profits, they would not fail to be excited for the purpose.

"Very good!" said Ralph, in allusion, no doubt, to some proceeding of the day. "He defies the usurer, does he? Well, we shall see. 'Honesty is the best policy,' is it? We'll try that too."

He stopped, and then walked on again.

"He is content," said Ralph, relaxing into a smile, "to set his known character and conduct against the power of money — dross, as he calls it. Why, what

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a dull blockhead this fellow must be! Dross, too—dross!—Who's that?"

"Me," said Newman Noggs, looking in. "Your niece."

"What of her?" asked Ralph sharply.

"She's here."

"Here!"

Newman jerked his head towards his little room, to signify that she was waiting there.

"What does she want?" asked Ralph.

"I don't know," rejoined Newman. "Shall I ask?" he added quickly.

"No," replied Ralph. "Show her in—stay." He hastily put away a padlocked cash-box that was on the table, and substituted in its stead an empty purse. "There," said Ralph. "*Now* she may come in."

Newman, with a grim smile at this manœuvre, beckoned the young lady to advance, and having placed a chair for her, retired; looking stealthily over his shoulder at Ralph as he limped slowly out.

"Well," said Ralph, roughly enough; but still with something more of kindness in his manner than he would have exhibited towards anybody else. "Well, my—dear. What now?"

Kate raised her eyes, which were filled with tears; and with an effort to master her emotion strove to speak, but in vain. So, drooping her head again, she remained silent. Her face was hidden from his view, but Ralph could see that she was weeping.

"I can guess the cause of this!" thought Ralph, after looking at her for some time in silence. "I can—I can guess the cause. Well! Well!"—thought Ralph—for the moment quite disconcerted,

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as he watched the anguish of his beautiful niece. "Where is the harm? only a few tears; and it's an excellent lesson for her — an excellent lesson."

"What is the matter?" asked Ralph, drawing a chair opposite, and sitting down.

He was rather taken aback by the sudden firmness with which Kate looked up and answered him.

"The matter which brings me to you, sir," she said, "is one which should call the blood up into your cheeks, and make you burn to hear, as it does me to tell. I have been wronged; my feelings have been outraged, insulted, wounded past all healing, and by your friends."

"Friends!" cried Ralph sternly. "*I* have no friends, girl."

"By the men I saw here, then," returned Kate quickly. "If they were no friends of yours, and you knew what they were, — oh, the more shame on you, uncle, for bringing me among them. To have subjected me to what I was exposed to here, through any misplaced confidence or imperfect knowledge of your guests, would have required some strong excuse; but if you did it — as I now believe you did — knowing them well, it was most dastardly and cruel."

Ralph drew back in utter amazement at this plain speaking, and regarded Kate with the sternest look. But she met his gaze proudly and firmly, and although her face was very pale, it looked more noble and handsome, lighted up as it was, than it had ever appeared before.

"There is some of that boy's blood in you, I see," said Ralph, speaking in his harshest tones, as something in the flashing eye reminded him of Nicholas at their last meeting.

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"I hope there is!" replied Kate. "I should be proud to know it. I am young, uncle, and all the difficulties and miseries of my situation have kept it down, but I have been roused to-day beyond all endurance, and come what may, *I will not*, as I am your brother's child, bear these insults longer."

"What insults, girl?" demanded Ralph sharply.

"Remember what took place here, and ask yourself," replied Kate, coloring deeply. "Uncle, you must — I am sure you will — release me from such vile and degrading companionship as I am exposed to now. I do not mean," said Kate, hurrying to the old man, and laying her arm upon his shoulder; "I do not mean to be angry and violent — I beg your pardon if I have seemed so, dear uncle, — but you do not know what I have suffered, you do not indeed. You cannot tell what the heart of a young girl is — I have no right to expect you should; but when I tell you that I am wretched, and that my heart is breaking, I am sure you will help me. I am sure, I am sure you will!"

Ralph looked at her for an instant; then turned away his head, and beat his foot nervously upon the ground.

"I have gone on day after day," said Kate, bending over him, and timidly placing her little hand in his, "in the hope that this persecution would cease; I have gone on day after day, compelled to assume the appearance of cheerfulness, when I was most unhappy. I have had no counsellor, no adviser, no one to protect me. Mamma supposes that these are honorable men, rich and distinguished, and how *can* I — how can I undeceive her — when she is so happy in these little delusions, which are the only happi-

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ness she has? The lady with whom you placed me, is not the person to whom I could confide matters of so much delicacy, and I have come at last to you, the only friend I have at hand — almost the only friend I have at all — to entreat and implore you to assist me."

"How can *I* assist you, child?" said Ralph, rising from his chair, and pacing up and down the room in his old attitude.

"You have influence with one of these men, I *know*," rejoined Kate emphatically. "Would not a word from you induce them to desist from this unmanly course?"

"No," said Ralph, suddenly turning; "at least — that — I can't say it, if it would."

"Can't say it!"

"No," said Ralph, coming to a dead stop, and clasping his hands more tightly behind him. "I can't say it."

Kate fell back a step or two, and looked at him, as if in doubt whether she had heard aright.

"We are connected in business," said Ralph, poising himself alternately on his toes and heels, and looking coolly in his niece's face, "in business, and I can't afford to offend them. What is it after all? We have all our trials, and this is one of yours. Some girls would be proud to have such gallants at their feet."

"Proud!" cried Kate.

"I don't say," rejoined Ralph, raising his forefinger, "but that you do right to despise them; no, you show your good sense in that, as indeed I knew from the first you would. Well. In all other respects you are comfortably bestowed. It's not

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much to bear. If this young lord does dog your footsteps, and whisper his drivelling inanities in your ears, what of it? It's a dishonorable passion. So be it; it won't last long. Some other novelty will spring up one day, and you will be released. In the meantime —"

"In the meantime," interrupted Kate, with becoming pride and indignation, "I am to be the scorn of my own sex, and the toy of the other; justly condemned by all women of right feeling, and despised by all honest and honorable men; sunken in my own esteem, and degraded in every eye that looks upon me. No, not if I work my fingers to the bone, not if I am driven to the roughest and hardest labor. Do not mistake me. I will not disgrace your recommendation. I will remain in the house in which it placed me, until I am entitled to leave it by the terms of my engagement; — though, mind, I see these men no more. When I quit it, I will hide myself from them and you, and, striving to support my mother by hard service, I will live, at least, in peace, and trust in God to help me."

With these words, she waved her hand, and quitted the room, leaving Ralph Nickleby motionless as a statue.

The surprise with which Kate, as she closed the room-door, beheld, close beside it, Newman Noggs standing bolt-upright in a little niche in the wall like some scarecrow or Guy Faux laid up in winter quarters, almost occasioned her to call aloud. But, Newman laying his finger upon his lips, she had the presence of mind to refrain.

"Don't," said Newman, gliding out of his recess,

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and accompanying her across the hall. "Don't cry, don't cry." Two very large tears, by the by, were running down Newman's face as he spoke.

"I see how it is," said poor Noggs, drawing from his pocket what seemed to be a very old duster, and wiping Kate's eyes with it, as gently as if she were an infant. "You're giving way now. Yes, yes, very good; that's right, I like that. It was right not to give way before him. Yes, yes! Ha, ha, ha! Oh, yes. Poor thing!"

With these disjointed exclamations, Newman wiped his own eyes with the afore-mentioned duster, and, limping to the street-door, opened it to let her out.

"Don't cry any more," whispered Newman. "I shall see you soon. Ha! ha! ha! And so shall somebody else too. Yes, yes. Ho! ho!"

"God bless you," answered Kate, hurrying out, "God bless you."

"Same to you," rejoined Newman, opening the door again a little way to say so. "Ha, ha, ha! Ho! ho! ho!"

And Newman Noggs opened the door once again to nod cheerfully, and laugh — and shut it, to shake his head mournfully, and cry.

Ralph remained in the same attitude till he heard the noise of the closing door, when he shrugged his shoulders, and after a few turns about the room — hasty at first, but gradually becoming slower, as he relapsed into himself — sat down before his desk.

It is one of those problems of human nature, which may be noted down, but not solved; — although Ralph felt no remorse at that moment for

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his conduct towards the innocent, true-hearted girl; although his libertine clients had done precisely what he had expected, precisely what he most wished, and precisely what would tend most to his advantage, still he hated them for doing it, from the very bottom of his soul.

"Ugh!" said Ralph, scowling round, and shaking his clenched hand as the faces of the two profligates rose up before his mind; "you shall pay for this. Oh! you shall pay for this!"

As the usurer turned for consolation to his books and papers, a performance was going on outside his office door, which would have occasioned him no small surprise, if he could by any means have become acquainted with it.

Newman Noggs was the sole actor. He stood at a little distance from the door, with his face towards it; and with the sleeves of his coat turned back at the wrists, was occupied in bestowing the most vigorous, scientific, and straightforward blows upon the empty air.

At first sight, this would have appeared merely a wise precaution in a man of sedentary habits, with the view of opening the chest and strengthening the muscles of the arms. But the intense eagerness and joy depicted in the face of Newman Noggs, which was suffused with perspiration; the surprising energy with which he directed a constant succession of blows towards a particular panel about five feet eight from the ground, and still worked away in the most untiring and persevering manner, would have sufficiently explained to the attentive observer, that his imagination was thrashing, to within an inch of his life, his body's most active employer, Mr. Ralph Nickleby.

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CHAPTER VIII.

OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF NICHOLAS, AND CERTAIN INTERNAL DIVISIONS IN THE COMPANY OF MR. VINCENT CRUMMLES.

The unexpected success and favor with which his experiment at Portsmouth had been received, induced Mr. Crummles to prolong his stay in that town for a fortnight beyond the period he had originally assigned for the duration of his visit, during which time Nicholas personated a vast variety of characters with undiminished success, and attracted so many people to the theatre who had never been seen there before, that a benefit was considered by the manager a very promising speculation. Nicholas assenting to the terms proposed, the benefit was had, and by it he realized no less a sum than twenty pounds.

Possessed of this unexpected wealth, his first act was to enclose to honest John Browdie the amount of his friendly loan, which he accompanied with many expressions of gratitude and esteem, and many cordial wishes for his matrimonial happiness. To Newman Noggs he forwarded one-half of the sum he had realized, entreating him to take an opportunity of handing it to Kate in secret, and

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conveying to her the warmest assurances of his love and affection. He made no mention of the way in which he had employed himself; merely informing Newman that a letter addressed to him under his assumed name at the Post Office, Portsmouth, would readily find him, and entreating that worthy friend to write full particulars of the situation of his mother and sister, and an account of all the grand things that Ralph Nickleby had done for them since his departure from London.

"You are out of spirits," said Smike, on the night after the letter had been despatched.

"Not I!" rejoined Nicholas, with assumed gayety, for the confession would have made the boy miserable all night; "I was thinking about my sister, Smike."

"Sister!"

"Ay."

"Is she like you?" inquired Smike.

"Why, so they say," replied Nicholas, laughing, "only a great deal handsomer."

"She must be *very* beautiful," said Smike, after thinking a little while with his hands folded together, and his eyes bent upon his friend.

"Anybody who didn't know you as well as I do, my dear fellow, would say you were an accomplished courtier," said Nicholas.

"I don't even know what that is," replied Smike, shaking his head. "Shall I ever see your sister?"

"To be sure," cried Nicholas; "we shall all be together one of these days — when we are rich, Smike."

"How is it that you, who are so kind and good to me, have nobody to be kind to you?" asked Smike. "I cannot make that out."

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"Why, it is a long story," replied Nicholas, "and one you would have some difficulty in comprehending, I fear. I have an enemy — you understand what that is?"

"Oh, yes, I understand that," said Smike.

"Well, it is owing to him," returned Nicholas. "He is rich, and not so easily punished as *your* old enemy, Mr. Squeers. He is my uncle, but he is a villain, and has done me wrong."

"Has he, though?" asked Smike, bending eagerly forward. "What is his name? Tell me his name."

"Ralph — Ralph Nickleby."

"Ralph Nickleby," repeated Smike. "Ralph. I'll get that name by heart."

He had muttered it over to himself some twenty times, when a loud knock at the door disturbed him from his occupation. Before he could open it, Mr. Folair, the pantomimist, thrust in his head.

Mr. Folair's head was usually decorated with a very round hat, unusually high in the crown, and curled up quite tight in the brims. On the present occasion he wore it very much on one side, with the back part forward in consequence of its being the least rusty; round his neck he wore a flaming red worsted comforter, whereof the straggling ends peeped out beneath his threadbare Newmarket coat, which was very tight and buttoned all the way up. He carried in his hand one very dirty glove, and a cheap dress cane with a glass handle; in short, his whole appearance was unusually dashing, and demonstrated a far more scrupulous attention to his toilet than he was in the habit of bestowing upon it.

"Good-evening, sir," said Mr. Folair, taking off

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the tall hat, and running his fingers through his hair. "I bring a communication. Hem!"

"From whom and what about?" inquired Nicholas. "You are unusually mysterious to-night."

"Cold, perhaps," returned Mr. Folair; "cold, perhaps. That is the fault of my position — not of myself, Mr. Johnson. My position as a mutual friend requires it, sir." Mr. Folair paused with a most impressive look, and diving into the hat before noticed, drew from thence a small piece of whity-brown paper curiously folded, whence he brought forth a note which it had served to keep clean, and handing it over to Nicholas, said, —

"Have the goodness to read that, sir."

Nicholas, in a state of much amazement, took the note and broke the seal, glancing at Mr. Folair as he did so, who, knitting his brow and pursing up his mouth with great dignity, was sitting with his eyes steadily fixed upon the ceiling.

It was directed to blank Johnson, Esq., by favor of Augustus Folair, Esq.; and the astonishment of Nicholas was in no degree lessened, when he found it to be couched in the following laconic terms: —

"Mr. Lenville presents his kind regards to Mr. Johnson, and will feel obliged if he will inform him at what hour to-morrow morning it will be most convenient to him to meet Mr. L. at the Theatre, for the purpose of having his nose pulled in the presence of the company.

"Mr. Lenville requests Mr. Johnson not to neglect making an appointment, as he has invited two or three professional friends to witness the ceremony, and cannot disappoint them upon any account whatever.

"*Portsmouth, Tuesday night.*"

Indignant as he was at this impertinence, there

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was something so exquisitely absurd in such a cartel of defiance, that Nicholas was obliged to bite his lip and read the note over two or three times before he could muster sufficient gravity and sternness to address the hostile messenger, who had not taken his eyes from the ceiling, nor altered the expression of his face in the slightest degree.

"Do you know the contents of this note, sir?" he asked, at length.

"Yes," rejoined Mr. Folair, looking round for an instant, and immediately carrying his eyes back again to the ceiling.

"And how dare you bring it here, sir?" asked Nicholas, tearing it into very little pieces, and jerking it in a shower towards the messenger. "Had you no fear of being kicked downstairs, sir?"

Mr. Folair turned his head — now ornamented with several fragments of the note — towards Nicholas, and with the same imperturbable dignity, briefly replied, "No."

"Then," said Nicholas, taking up the tall hat and tossing it towards the door, "you had better follow that article of your dress, sir, or you may find yourself very disagreeably deceived, and that within a dozen seconds."

"I say, Johnson," remonstrated Mr. Folair, suddenly losing all his dignity, "none of that, you know. No tricks with a gentleman's wardrobe."

"Leave the room," returned Nicholas. "How could you presume to come here on such an errand, you scoundrel?"

"Pooh! pooh!" said Mr. Folair, unwinding his comforter, and gradually getting himself out of it. "There — that's enough."

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"Enough!" cried Nicholas, advancing towards him. "Take yourself off, sir."

"Pooh! pooh! I tell you," returned Mr. Folair, waving his hand in deprecation of any further wrath; "I wasn't in earnest. I only brought it in joke."

"You had better be careful how you indulge in such jokes again," said Nicholas, "or you may find an allusion to pulling noses rather a dangerous reminder for the subject of your facetiousness. Was it written in joke, too, pray?"

"No, no, that's the best of it," returned the actor; "right down earnest — honor bright."

Nicholas could not repress a smile at the odd figure before him, which, at all times more calculated to provoke mirth than anger, was especially so at that moment, when with one knee upon the ground, Mr. Folair twirled his old hat round upon his hand, and affected the extremest agony lest any of the nap should have been knocked off — an ornament which, it is almost superfluous to say, it had not boasted for many months.

"Come, sir," said Nicholas, laughing in spite of himself. "Have the goodness to explain."

"Why, I'll tell you how it is," said Mr. Folair, sitting himself down in a chair with great coolness. "Since you came here Lenville has done nothing but second business, and, instead of having a reception every night as he used to have, they have let him come on as if he was nobody."

"What do you mean by a reception?" asked Nicholas.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Mr. Folair, "what an unsophisticated shepherd you are, Johnson! Why,

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applause from the house when you first come on. So he has gone on night after night, never getting a hand, and you getting a couple of rounds at least, and sometimes three, till at length he got quite desperate, and had half a mind last night to play Tybalt with a real sword, and pink you — not dangerously, but just enough to lay you up for a month or two."

"Very considerate," remarked Nicholas.

"Yes, I think it was under the circumstances; his professional reputation being at stake," said Mr. Folair quite seriously. "But his heart failed him, and he cast about for some other way of annoying you, and making himself popular at the same time — for that's the point. Notoriety, notoriety, is the thing. Bless you, if he had pinked you," said Mr. Folair, stopping to make a calculation in his mind, "it would have been worth — ah, it would have been worth eight or ten shillings a week to him. All the town would have come to see the actor who nearly killed a man by mistake; I shouldn't wonder if it had got him an engagement in London. However, he was obliged to try some other mode of getting popular, and this one occurred to him. It's a clever idea, really. If you had shown the white feather, and let him pull your nose, he'd have got it into the paper; if you had sworn the peace against him, it would have been in the paper too, and he'd have been just as much talked about as you — don't you see?"

"Oh, certainly," rejoined Nicholas; "but suppose I were to turn the tables, and pull *his* nose, what then? Would that make his fortune?"

"Why, I don't think it would," replied Mr.

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Folair, scratching his head, "because there wouldn't be any romance about it, and he wouldn't be favorably known. To tell you the truth, though, he didn't calculate much upon that, for you're always so mild-spoken, and are so popular among the women, that we didn't suspect you of showing fight. If you did, however, he has a way of getting out of it easily, depend upon that."

"Has he?" rejoined Nicholas. "We will try, to-morrow morning. In the meantime, you can give whatever account of our interview you like best. Good-night."

As Mr. Folair was pretty well known among his fellow-actors for a man who delighted in mischief, and was by no means scrupulous, Nicholas had not much doubt but that he had secretly prompted the tragedian in the course he had taken, and, moreover, that he would have carried his mission with a very high hand if he had not been disconcerted by the very unexpected demonstrations with which it had been received. It was not worth his while to be serious with him, however, so he dismissed the pantomimist, with a gentle hint that if he offended again it would be under the penalty of a broken head; and Mr. Folair, taking the caution in exceedingly good part, walked away to confer with his principal, and give such an account of his proceedings as he might think best calculated to carry on the joke.

He had no doubt reported that Nicholas was in a state of extreme bodily fear; for when that young gentleman walked with much deliberation down to the theatre next morning at the usual hour, he found all the company assembled in evident expec-

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tation, and Mr. Lenville, with his severest stage face, sitting majestically on a table, whistling defiance.

Now the ladies were on the side of Nicholas, and the gentlemen (being jealous) were on the side of the disappointed tragedian; so that the latter formed a little group about the redoubtable Mr. Lenville, and the former looked on at a little distance in some trepidation and anxiety. On Nicholas stopping to salute them, Mr. Lenville laughed a scornful laugh, and made some general remark touching the natural history of puppies.

"Oh!" said Nicholas, looking quietly round, "are you there?"

"Slave!" returned Mr. Lenville, flourishing his right arm, and approaching Nicholas with a theatrical stride. But somehow he appeared just at that moment a little startled, as if Nicholas did not look quite so frightened as he had expected, and came all at once to an awkward halt, at which the assembled ladies burst into a shrill laugh.

"Object of my scorn and hatred!" said Mr. Lenville, "I hold ye in contempt."

Nicholas laughed in very unexpected enjoyment of this performance; and the ladies, by way of encouragement, laughed louder than before; whereat Mr. Lenville assumed his bitterest smile, and expressed his opinion that they were "minions."

"But they shall not protect ye!" said the tragedian, taking an upward look at Nicholas, beginning at his boots and ending at the crown of his head, and then a downward one, beginning at the crown of his head, and ending at his boots — which two looks, as everybody knows, express defiance on the stage. "They shall not protect ye — boy!"

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Thus speaking, Mr. Lenville folded his arms, and treated Nicholas to that expression of face with which, in melodramatic performances, he was in the habit of regarding the tyrannical kings when they said, "Away with him to the deepest dungeon beneath the castle moat;" and which, accompanied with a little jingling of fetters, had been known to produce great effects in its time.

Whether it was the absence of the fetters or not, it made no very deep impression on Mr. Lenville's adversary, however, but rather seemed to increase the good-humor expressed in his countenance; in which stage of the contest, one or two gentlemen, who had come out expressly to witness the pulling of Nicholas's nose, grew impatient, murmuring that if it were to be done at all it had better be done at once, and that if Mr. Lenville didn't mean to do it he had better say so, and not keep them waiting there. Thus urged, the tragedian adjusted the cuff of his right coat sleeve for the performance of the operation, and walked in a very stately manner up to Nicholas, who suffered him to approach to within the requisite distance, and then, without the smallest discomposure, knocked him down.

Before the discomfited tragedian could raise his head from the boards, Mrs. Lenville (who, as has been before hinted, was in an interesting state) rushed from the rear rank of ladies, and, uttering a piercing scream, threw herself upon the body.

"Do you see this, monster? Do you see *this?*" cried Mr. Lenville, sitting up, and pointing to his prostrate lady, who was holding him very tight round the waist.

"Come," said Nicholas, nodding his head, "apol-

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ogize for the insolent note you wrote to me last night, and waste no more time in talking."

"Never!" cried Mr. Lenville.

"Yes — yes — yes!" screamed his wife. "For my sake — for mine, Lenville — forego all idle forms, unless you would see me a blighted corse at your feet."

"This is affecting!" said Mr. Lenville, looking round him, and drawing the back of his hand across his eyes. "The ties of nature are strong. The weak husband and the father — the father that is yet to be — relents. I apologize."

"Humbly and submissively?" said Nicholas.

"Humbly and submissively," returned the tragedian, scowling upwards. "But only to save her, — for a time will come —"

"Very good," said Nicholas; "I hope Mrs. Lenville may have a good one; and when it does come, and you are a father, you shall retract it if you have the courage. There. Be careful, sir, to what lengths your jealousy carries you another time; and be careful, also, before you venture too far, to ascertain your rival's temper." With this parting advice Nicholas picked up Mr. Lenville's ash stick, which had flown out of his hand, and breaking it in half, threw him the pieces and withdrew, bowing slightly to the spectators as he walked out.

The profoundest deference was paid to Nicholas that night, and the people who had been most anxious to have his nose pulled in the morning, embraced occasions of taking him aside, and telling him with great feeling, how very friendly they took it that he should have treated that Lenville so properly, who was a most unbearable fellow, and on

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whom they had all, by a remarkable coincidence, at one time or other contemplated the infliction of condign punishment, which they had only been restrained from administering by considerations of mercy; indeed, to judge from the invariable termination of all these stories, there never was such a charitable and kind-hearted set of people as the male members of Mr. Crummles's company.

Nicholas bore his triumph, as he had his success in the little world of the theatre, with the utmost moderation and good-humor. The crestfallen Mr. Lenville made an expiring effort to obtain revenge by sending a boy into the gallery to hiss, but he fell a sacrifice to popular indignation, and was promptly turned out without having his money back.

"Well, Smike," said Nicholas when the first piece was over, and he had almost finished dressing to go home, "is there any letter yet?"

"Yes," replied Smike, "I got this one from the post-office."

"From Newman Noggs," said Nicholas, casting his eye upon the cramped direction; "it's no easy matter to make his writing out. Let me see — let me see."

By dint of poring over the letter for half an hour, he contrived to make himself master of the contents, which were certainly not of a nature to set his mind at ease. Newman took upon himself to send back the ten pounds, observing that he had ascertained that neither Mrs. Nickleby nor Kate was in actual want of money at the moment, and that a time might shortly come when Nicholas might want it more. He entreated him not to be alarmed at what he was about to say; — there was no bad news — they were

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Nicholas hints at the probability of his leaving the Company.

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in good health — but he thought circumstances might occur, or were occurring, which would render it absolutely necessary that Kate should have her brother's protection, and if so, Newman said, he would write to him to that effect, either by the next post or the next but one.

Nicholas read this passage very often, and the more he thought of it the more he began to fear some treachery upon the part of Ralph. Once or twice he felt tempted to repair to London at all hazards without an hour's delay, but a little reflection assured him that if such a step were necessary, Newman would have spoken out and told him so at once.

"At all events I should prepare them here for the possibility of my going away suddenly," said Nicholas; "I should lose no time in doing that." As the thought occurred to him, he took up his hat and hurried to the green-room.

"Well, Mr. Johnson," said Mrs. Crummles, who was seated there in full regal costume, with the phenomenon as the Maiden in her maternal arms, "next week for Ryde, then for Winchester, then for —"

"I have some reason to fear," interrupted Nicholas, "that before you leave here my career with you will have closed."

"Closed!" cried Mrs. Crummles, raising her hands in astonishment.

"Closed!" cried Miss Snevellicci, trembling so much in her tights that she actually laid her hand upon the shoulder of the manageress for support.

"Why, he don't mean to say he's going?" exclaimed Mrs. Grudden, making her way towards Mrs. Crummles. "Hoity toity! nonsense."

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The phenomenon, being of an affectionate nature and moreover excitable, raised a loud cry, and Miss Belvawney and Miss Bravassa actually shed tears. Even the male performers stopped in their conversation, and echoed the word "Going!" although some among them (and they had been the loudest in their congratulations that day) winked at each other as though they would not be sorry to lose such a favored rival; an opinion, indeed, which the honest Mr. Folair, who was ready dressed for the savage, openly stated in so many words to a demon with whom he was sharing a pot of porter.

Nicholas briefly said that he feared it would be so, although he could not yet speak with any degree of certainty; and getting away as soon as he could, went home to con Newman's letter once more, and speculate upon it afresh.

How trifling all that had been occupying his time and thoughts for many weeks seemed to him during that sleepless night, and how constantly and incessantly present to his imagination was the one idea that Kate in the midst of some great trouble and distress might even then be looking — and vainly too — for him!

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CHAPTER IX.

FESTIVITIES ARE HELD IN HONOR OF NICHOLAS, WHO SUDDENLY WITHDRAWS HIMSELF FROM THE SOCIETY OF MR. VINCENT CRUMMLES AND HIS THEATRICAL COMPANIONS.

Mr. Vincent Crummles was no sooner acquainted with the public announcement which Nicholas had made relative to the probability of his shortly ceasing to be a member of the company, than he evinced many tokens of grief and consternation; and, in the extremity of his despair, even held out certain vague promises of a speedy improvement not only in the amount of his regular salary, but also in the contingent emoluments appertaining to his authorship. Finding Nicholas bent upon quitting the society — for he had now determined that, even if no further tidings came from Newman, he would, at all hazards, ease his mind by repairing to London and ascertaining the exact position of his sister — Mr. Crummles was fain to content himself by calculating the chances of his coming back again, and taking prompt and energetic measures to make the most of him before he went away.

"Let me see," said Mr. Crummles, taking off his outlaw's wig, the better to arrive at a cool-headed

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view of the whole case. "Let me see. This is Wednesday night. We'll have posters out the first thing in the morning, announcing positively your last appearance for to-morrow."

"But perhaps it may not be my last appearance, you know," said Nicholas. "Unless I am summoned away, I should be sorry to inconvenience you by leaving before the end of the week."

"So much the better," returned Mr. Crummles. "We can have positively your last appearance, on Thursday — re-engagement for one night more, on Friday — and, yielding to the wishes of numerous influential patrons, who were disappointed in obtaining seats, on Saturday. That ought to bring three very decent houses."

"Then I am to make three last appearances, am I?" inquired Nicholas, smiling.

"Yes," rejoined the manager, scratching his head with an air of some vexation; "three is not enough, and it's very bungling and irregular not to have more, but if we can't help it we can't, so there's no use in talking. A novelty would be very desirable. You couldn't sing a comic song on the pony's back, could you?"

"No," replied Nicholas, "I couldn't indeed."

"It has drawn money before now," said Mr. Crummles, with a look of disappointment. "What do you think of a brilliant display of fireworks?"

"That it would be rather expensive," replied Nicholas dryly.

"Eighteenpence would do it," said Mr. Crummles. "You on the top of a pair of steps with the phenomenon in an attitude; 'Farewell' on a transparency behind; and nine people at the wings with

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a squib in each hand — all the dozen and a half going off at once — it would be very grand — awful from the front, quite awful."

As Nicholas appeared by no means impressed with the solemnity of the proposed effect, but, on the contrary, received the proposition in a most irreverent manner, and laughed at it very heartily, Mr. Crummles abandoned the project in its birth, and gloomily observed that they must make up the best bill they could with combats and hornpipes, and so stick to the legitimate drama.

For the purpose of carrying this object into instant execution, the manager at once repaired to a small dressing-room, adjacent, where Mrs. Crummles was then occupied in exchanging the habiliments of a melodramatic empress for the ordinary attire of matrons in the nineteenth century. And with the assistance of this lady, and the accomplished Mrs. Grudden (who had quite a genius for making out bills, being a great hand at throwing in the notes of admiration, and knowing from long experience exactly where the largest capitals ought to go), he seriously applied himself to the composition of the poster.

"Heigho!" sighed Nicholas, as he threw himself back in the prompter's chair, after telegraphing the needful directions to Smike, who had been playing a meagre tailor in the interlude, with one skirt to his coat, and a little pocket-handkerchief with a large hole in it, and a woollen nightcap, and a red nose, and other distinctive marks peculiar to tailors on the stage. "Heigho! I wish all this were over."

"Over, Mr. Johnson!" repeated a female voice behind him, in a kind of plaintive surprise.

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"It was an ungallant speech, certainly," said Nicholas, looking up to see who the speaker was, and recognizing Miss Snevellicci. "I would not have made it if I had known you had been within hearing."

"What a dear that Mr. Digby is!" said Miss Snevellicci, as the tailor went off on the opposite side, at the end of the piece, with great applause. (Smike's theatrical name was Digby.)

"I'll tell him presently, for his gratification, that you said so," returned Nicholas.

"Oh, you naughty thing!" rejoined Miss Snevellicci. "I don't know, though, that I should much mind *his* knowing my opinion of him; with some other people, indeed, it might be—" Here Miss Snevellicci stopped, as though waiting to be questioned, but no questioning came, for Nicholas was thinking about more serious matters.

"How kind it is of you," resumed Miss Snevellicci, after a short silence, "to sit waiting here for him night after night, night after night, no matter how tired you are; and taking so much pains with him, and doing it all with as much delight and readiness as if you were coining gold by it!"

"He well deserves all the kindness I can show him, and a great deal more," said Nicholas. "He is the most grateful, single-hearted, affectionate creature that ever breathed."

"So odd, too," remarked Miss Snevellicci, "isn't he?"

"God help him, and those who have made him so; he is indeed," rejoined Nicholas, shaking his head.

"He is such a devilish close chap," said Mr.

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Folair, who had come up a little before, and now joined in the conversation. "Nobody can ever get anything out of him."

"What *should* they get out of him?" asked Nicholas, turning round with some abruptness.

"Zooks! what a fire-eater you are, Johnson!" returned Mr. Folair, pulling up the heel of his dancing shoe. "I'm only talking of the natural curiosity of the people here, to know what he has been about all his life."

"Poor fellow! it is pretty plain, I should think, that he has not the intellect to have been about anything of much importance to them or anybody else," said Nicholas.

"Ay," rejoined the actor, contemplating the effect of his face in a lamp reflector, "but that involves the whole question, you know."

"What question?" asked Nicholas.

"Why, the who he is and what he is, and how you two, who are so different, came to be such close companions," replied Mr. Folair, delighted with the opportunity of saying something disagreeable. "That's in everybody's mouth."

"The 'everybody' of the theatre, I suppose?" said Nicholas contemptuously.

"In it and out of it too," replied the actor. "Why, you know, Lenville says—"

"I thought I had silenced him effectually," interrupted Nicholas, reddening.

"Perhaps you have," rejoined the immovable Mr. Folair; "if you have, he said this before he was silenced: Lenville says that you're a regular stick of an actor, and that it's only the mystery about you that has caused you to go down with the people

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here, and that Crummles keeps it up for his own sake; though Lenville says he don't believe there's anything at all in it, except your having got into a scrape and run away from somewhere, for doing something or other."

"Oh!" said Nicholas, forcing a smile.

"That's a part of what he says," added Mr. Folair. "I mention it as the friend of both parties, and in strict confidence. *I* don't agree with him, you know. He says he takes Digby to be more knave than fool; and old Fluggers, who does the heavy business you know, *he* says that when he delivered messages at Covent Garden the season before last, there used to be a pickpocket hovering about the coach-stand who had exactly the face of Digby; though, as he very properly says, Digby may not be the same, but only his brother, or some near relation."

"Oh!" cried Nicholas again.

"Yes," said Mr. Folair, with undisturbed calmness, "that's what they say. I thought I'd tell you, because really you ought to know. Oh! here's this blessed phenomenon at last. Ugh, you little imposition, I should like to — quite ready, my darling — humbug — Ring up, Mrs. G., and let the favorite wake 'em."

Uttering in a loud voice such of the latter allusions as were complimentary to the unconscious phenomenon, and giving the rest in a confidential "aside" to Nicholas, Mr. Folair followed the ascent of the curtain with his eyes, regarded with a sneer the reception of Miss Crummles as the Maiden, and, falling back a step or two to advance with the better effect, uttered a preliminary howl, and "went

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on" chattering his teeth and brandishing his tin tomahawk as the Indian Savage.

"So these are some of the stories they invent about us, and bandy from mouth to mouth!" thought Nicholas. "If a man would commit an inexpiable offence against any society, large or small, let him be successful. They will forgive him any crime but that."

"You surely don't mind what that malicious creature says, Mr. Johnson?" observed Miss Snevellicci in her most winning tones.

"Not I," replied Nicholas. "If I were going to remain here, I might think it worth my while to embroil myself. As it is, let them talk till they are hoarse. But here," added Nicholas, as Smike approached, "here comes the subject of a portion of their good-nature, so let he and I say good-night together."

"No, I will not let either of you say anything of the kind," returned Miss Snevellicci. "You must come home and see mamma, who only came to Portsmouth to-day, and is dying to behold you. Led, my dear, persuade Mr. Johnson."

"Oh, I'm sure," returned Miss Ledrook, with considerable vivacity, "if *you* can't persuade him—" Miss Ledrook said no more, but intimated, by a dexterous playfulness, that if Miss Snevellicci couldn't persuade him, nobody could.

"Mr. and Mrs. Lillyvick have taken lodgings in our house, and share our sitting-room for the present," said Miss Snevellicci. "Won't that induce you?"

"Surely," returned Nicholas, "I can require no possible inducement beyond your invitation."

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"Oh, no! I dare say," rejoined Miss Snevellicci. And Miss Ledrook said, "Upon my word!" Upon which Miss Snevellicci said that Miss Ledrook was a giddy thing; and Miss Ledrook said that Miss Snevellicci needn't color up quite so much; and Miss Snevellicci beat Miss Ledrook, and Miss Ledrook beat Miss Snevellicci.

"Come," said Miss Ledrook, "it's high time we were there, or we shall have poor Mrs. Snevellicci thinking that you have run away with her daughter, Mr. Johnson; and then we should have a pretty to-do."

"My dear Led," remonstrated Miss Snevellicci, "how you do talk!"

Miss Ledrook made no answer, but taking Smike's arm in hers, left her friend and Nicholas to follow at their pleasure; which it pleased them, or rather pleased Nicholas, who had no great fancy for a *tête-à-tête* under the circumstances, to do at once.

There were not wanting matters of conversation when they reached the street, for it turned out that Miss Snevellicci had a small basket to carry home, and Miss Ledrook a small bandbox, both containing such minor articles of theatrical costume as the lady performers usually carried to and fro every evening. Nicholas would insist upon carrying the basket, and Miss Snevellicci would insist upon carrying it herself, which gave rise to a struggle, in which Nicholas captured the basket and the bandbox likewise. Then Nicholas said, that he wondered what could possibly be inside the basket, and attempted to peep in, whereat Miss Snevellicci screamed, and declared that if she thought he had seen, she was sure she should faint away. This

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declaration was followed by a similar attempt on the bandbox, and similar demonstrations on the part of Miss Ledrook, and then both ladies vowed that they wouldn't move a step further until Nicholas had promised that he wouldn't offer to peep again. At last Nicholas pledged himself to betray no further curiosity, and they walked on: both ladies giggling very much, and declaring that they never had seen such a wicked creature in all their born days — never.

Lightening the way with such pleasantry as this, they arrived at the tailor's house in no time; and here they made quite a little party, there being present besides Mr. Lillyvick and Mrs. Lillyvick, not only Miss Snevellicci's mamma, but her papa also. And an uncommonly fine man Miss Snevellicci's papa was, with a hook nose, and a white forehead, and curly black hair, and high cheek bones, and altogether quite a handsome face, only a little pimply as though with drinking. He had a very broad chest, had Miss Snevellicci's papa, and he wore a threadbare blue dress-coat buttoned with gilt buttons tight across it; and he no sooner saw Nicholas come into the room, than he whipped the two forefingers of his right hand in between the two centre buttons, and sticking his other arm gracefully akimbo seemed to say, "Now, here I am, my buck, and what have you got to say to me?"

Such was, and in such an attitude sat Miss Snevellicci's papa, who had been in the profession ever since he had first played the ten-year-old imps in the Christmas pantomimes; who could sing a little, dance a little, fence a little, act a little, and do everything a little, but not much; who had been

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sometimes in the ballet, and sometimes in the chorus, at every theatre in London; who was always selected in virtue of his figure to play the military visitors and the speechless noblemen; who always wore a smart dress, and came on arm in arm with a smart lady in short petticoats, — and always did it too with such an air that people in the pit had been several times known to cry out "Bravo!" under the impression that he was somebody. Such was Miss Snevellicci's papa, upon whom some envious persons cast the imputation that he occasionally beat Miss Snevellicci's mamma, who was still a dancer, with a neat little figure and some remains of good looks; and who now sat, as she danced, — being rather too old for the full glare of the footlights, — in the background.

To these good people Nicholas was presented with much formality. The introduction being completed, Miss Snevellicci's papa (who was scented with rum and water) said that he was delighted to make the acquaintance of a gentleman so highly talented; and furthermore remarked, that there hadn't been such a hit made — no, not since the first appearance of his friend Mr. Glavormelly, at the Coburg.

"You have seen him, sir?" said Miss Snevellicci's papa.

"No, really I never did," replied Nicholas.

"You never saw my friend Glavormelly, sir!" said Miss Snevellicci's papa. "Then you have never seen acting yet. If he had lived —"

"Oh, he is dead, is he?" interrupted Nicholas.

"He is," said Mr. Snevellicci, "but he isn't in Westminster Abbey, more's the shame. He was

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a— Well, no matter. He is gone to that bourne from whence no traveller returns. I hope he is appreciated *there*."

So saying, Miss Snevellicci's papa rubbed the tip of his nose with a very yellow silk handkerchief, and gave the company to understand that these recollections overcame him.

"Well, Mr. Lillyvick," said Nicholas, "and how are you?"

"Quite well, sir," replied the collector. "There is nothing like the married state, sir, depend upon it."

"Indeed!" said Nicholas, laughing.

"Ah! nothing like it, sir," replied Mr. Lillyvick solemnly. "How do you think," whispered the collector, drawing him aside, "how do you think she looks to-night?"

"As handsome as ever," replied Nicholas, glancing at the late Miss Petowker.

"Why, there's a air about her, sir," whispered the collector, "that I never saw in anybody. Look at her now she moves to put the kettle on. There! Isn't it fascination, sir?"

"You're a lucky man," said Nicholas.

"Ha, ha, ha!" rejoined the collector. "No. Do you think I am, though, eh? Perhaps I may be, perhaps I may be. I say, I couldn't have done much better if I had been a young man, could I? You couldn't have done much better yourself, could you — eh — could you?" With such inquiries, and many more such, Mr. Lillyvick jerked his elbow into Nicholas's side, and chuckled till his face became quite purple in the attempt to keep down his satisfaction.

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By this time the cloth had been laid under the joint superintendence of all the ladies, upon two tables put together, one being high and narrow, and the other low and broad. There were oysters at the top, sausages at the bottom, a pair of snuffers in the centre, and baked potatoes wherever it was most convenient to put them. Two additional chairs were brought in from the bedroom: Miss Snevellicci sat at the head of the table, and Mr. Lillyvick at the foot; and Nicholas had not only the honor of sitting next Miss Snevellicci, but of having Miss Snevellicci's mamma on his right hand, and Miss Snevellicci's papa over the way. In short, he was the hero of the feast; and when the table was cleared and something warm introduced, Miss Snevellicci's papa got up and proposed his health in a speech containing such affecting allusions to his coming departure, that Miss Snevellicci wept, and was compelled to retire into the bedroom.

"Hush! Don't take any notice of it," said Miss Ledrook, peeping in from the bedroom. "Say, when she comes back, that she exerts herself too much."

Miss Ledrook eked out this speech with so many mysterious nods and frowns before she shut the door again, that a profound silence came upon all the company, during which Miss Snevellicci's papa looked very big indeed — several sizes larger than life — at everybody in turn, but particularly at Nicholas, and kept on perpetually emptying his tumbler and filling it again, until the ladies returned in a cluster, with Miss Snevellicci among them.

"You needn't alarm yourself a bit, Mr. Snevellicci," said Mrs. Lillyvick. "She is only a little

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weak and nervous; she has been so ever since the morning."

"Oh," said Mr. Snevellicci, "that's all, is it?"

"Oh, yes, that's all. Don't make a fuss about it," cried all the ladies together.

Now this was not exactly the kind of reply suited to Mr. Snevellicci's importance as a man and a father, so he picked out the unfortunate Mrs. Snevellicci, and asked her what the devil she meant by talking to him in that way.

"Dear me, my dear —" said Mrs. Snevellicci.

"Don't call me your dear, ma'am," said Mr. Snevellicci, "if you please."

"Pray, pa, don't," interposed Miss Snevellicci.

"Don't what, my child?"

"Talk in that way."

"Why not?" said Mr. Snevellicci. "I hope you don't suppose there's anybody here who is to prevent my talking as I like?"

"Nobody wants to, pa," rejoined his daughter.

"Nobody would if they did want to," said Mr. Snevellicci. "I am not ashamed of myself, Snevellicci is my name; I'm to be found in Broad Court, Bow Street, when I'm in town. If I'm not at home, let any man ask for me at the stage-door. Damme, they know me at the stage-door, I suppose. Most men have seen my portrait at the cigar shop round the corner. I've been mentioned in the newspapers before now, haven't I? Talk! I'll tell you what; if I found out that any man had been tampering with the affections of my daughter, I wouldn't talk. I'd astonish him without talking; — that's my way."

So saying, Mr. Snevellicci struck the palm of his left hand three smart blows with his clenched fist:

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pulled a phantom nose with his right thumb and forefinger, and swallowed another glassful at a draught. "That's my way," repeated Mr. Snevellicci.

Most public characters have their failings; and the truth is that Mr. Snevellicci was a little addicted to drinking; or, if the whole truth must be told, that he was scarcely ever sober. He knew in his cups three distinct stages of intoxication, — the dignified — the quarrelsome — the amorous. When professionally engaged he never got beyond the dignified; in private circles he went through all three, passing from one to another with a rapidity of transition often rather perplexing to those who had not the honor of his acquaintance.

Thus Mr. Snevellicci had no sooner swallowed another glassful than he smiled upon all present in happy forgetfulness of having exhibited symptoms of pugnacity, and proposed "The ladies — bless their hearts!" in a most vivacious manner.

"I love 'em," said Mr. Snevellicci, looking round the table, "I love 'em, every one."

"Not every one," reasoned Mr. Lillyvick mildly.

"Yes, every one," repeated Mr. Snevellicci.

"That would include the married ladies, you know," said Mr. Lillyvick.

"I love them too, sir," said Mr. Snevellicci.

The collector looked into the surrounding faces with an aspect of grave astonishment, seeming to say, "This is a nice man!" and appeared a little surprised that Mrs. Lillyvick's manner yielded no evidences of horror and indignation.

"One good turn deserves another," said Mr. Snevellicci. "I love them and they love me." And

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as if this avowal were not made in sufficient disregard and defiance of all moral obligations, what did Mr. Snevellicci do? He winked — winked openly and undisguisedly; winked with his right eye — upon Henrietta Lillyvick!

The collector fell back in his chair in the intensity of his astonishment. If anybody had winked at her as Henrietta Petowker, it would have been indecorous in the last degree; but as Mrs. Lillyvick! While he thought of it in a cold perspiration, and wondered whether it was possible that he could be dreaming, Mr. Snevellicci repeated the wink, and drinking to Mrs. Lillyvick in dumb show, actually blew her a kiss! Mr. Lillyvick left his chair, walked straight up to the other end of the table, and fell upon him — literally fell upon him — instantaneously. Mr. Lillyvick was no light weight, and consequently when he fell upon Mr. Snevellicci, Mr. Snevellicci fell under the table. Mr. Lillyvick followed him, and the ladies screamed.

"What is the matter with the men, — are they mad?" cried Nicholas, diving under the table, dragging up the collector by main force, and thrusting him, all doubled up, into a chair, as if he had been a stuffed figure. "What do you mean? what do you want to do? what is the matter with you?"

While Nicholas raised up the collector, Smike had performed the same office for Mr. Snevellicci, who now regarded his late adversary in tipsy amazement.

"Look here, sir," replied Mr. Lillyvick, pointing to his astonished wife, "here is purity and elegance combined, whose feelings have been outraged — violated, sir!"

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"Lor, what nonsense he talks!" exclaimed Mrs. Lillyvick in answer to the inquiring look of Nicholas. "Nobody has said anything to me."

"Said, Henrietta!" cried the collector. "Didn't I see him—" Mr. Lillyvick couldn't bring himself to utter the word, but he counterfeited the motion of the eye.

"Well!" cried Mrs. Lillyvick. "Do you suppose nobody is ever to look at me? A pretty thing to be married indeed, if that was law!"

"You didn't mind it?" cried the collector.

"Mind it!" repeated Mrs. Lillyvick contemptuously. "You ought to go down on your knees and beg everybody's pardon, that you ought."

"Pardon, my dear?" said the dismayed collector.

"Yes, and mine first," replied Mrs. Lillyvick. "Do you suppose *I* ain't the best judge of what's proper and what's improper?"

"To be sure," cried all the ladies. "Do you suppose *we* shouldn't be the first to speak, if there was anything that ought to be taken notice of?"

"Do you suppose *they* don't know, sir?" said Miss Snevellicci's papa, pulling up his collar, and muttering something about a punching of heads, and being only withheld by considerations of age. With which Miss Snevellicci's papa looked steadily and sternly at Mr. Lillyvick for some seconds, and then rising deliberately from his chair, kissed the ladies all round, beginning with Mrs. Lillyvick.

The unhappy collector looked piteously at his wife, as if to see whether there was any one trait of Miss Petowker left in Mrs. Lillyvick, and finding too surely that there was not, begged pardon of all the company with great humility, and sat down

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such a crestfallen, dispirited, disenchanted man, that despite all his selfishness and dotage, he was quite an object of compassion.

Miss Snevellicci's papa being greatly exalted by this triumph, and incontestable proof of his popularity with the fair sex, quickly grew convivial, not to say uproarious; volunteering more than one song of no inconsiderable length, and regaling the social circle between-whiles with recollections of divers splendid women who had been supposed to entertain a passion for himself, several of whom he toasted by name, taking occasion to remark at the same time that if he had been a little more alive to his own interest, he might have been rolling at that moment in his chariot and four. These reminiscences appeared to awaken no very torturing pangs in the breast of Mrs. Snevellicci, who was sufficiently occupied in descanting to Nicholas upon the manifold accomplishments and merits of her daughter. Nor was the young lady herself at all behindhand in displaying her choicest allurements; but these, heightened as they were by the artifices of Miss Ledrook, had no effect whatever in increasing the attentions of Nicholas, who, with the precedent of Miss Squeers still fresh in his memory, steadily resisted every fascination, and placed so strict a guard upon his behavior that when he had taken his leave the ladies were unanimous in pronouncing him quite a monster of insensibility.

Next day the posters appeared in due course, and the public were informed, in all the colors of the rainbow, and in letters afflicted with every possible variation of spinal deformity, how that Mr. Johnson would have the honor of making his last appear-

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ance that evening, and how that an early application for places was requested, in consequence of the extraordinary overflow attendant on his performances, — it being a remarkable fact in theatrical history, but one long since established beyond dispute, that it is a hopeless endeavor to attract people to a theatre unless they can be first brought to believe that they will never get into it.

Nicholas was somewhat at a loss, on entering the theatre at night, to account for the unusual perturbation and excitement visible in the countenances of all the company, but he was not long in doubt as to the cause, for before he could make any inquiry respecting it Mr. Crummles approached, and in an agitated tone of voice informed him that there was a London manager in the boxes.

"It's the phenomenon, depend upon it, sir," said Crummles, dragging Nicholas to the little hole in the curtain that he might look through at the London manager. "I have not the smallest doubt it's the fame of the phenomenon — that's the man; him in the great-coat and no shirt-collar. She shall have ten pound a week, Johnson; she shall not appear on the London boards for a farthing less. They sha'n't engage her either, unless they engage Mrs. Crummles too — twenty pound a week for the pair; or I'll tell you what, I'll throw in myself and the two boys, and they shall have the family for thirty. I can't say fairer than that. They must take us all if none of us will go without the others. That's the way some of the London people do, and it always answers. Thirty pound a week — it's too cheap, Johnson. It's dirt cheap."

Nicholas replied that it certainly was; and Mr.

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Vincent Crummles, taking several huge pinches of snuff to compose his feelings, hurried away to tell Mrs. Crummles that he had quite settled the only terms that could be accepted, and had resolved not to abate one single farthing.

When everybody was dressed and the curtain went up, the excitement occasioned by the presence of the London manager increased a thousand-fold. Everybody happened to know that the London manager had come down specially to witness his or her own performance, and all were in a flutter of anxiety and expectation. Some of those who were not on in the first scene hurried to the wings, and there stretched their necks to have a peep at him; others stole up into the two little private boxes over the stage-doors, and from that position reconnoitred the London manager. Once the London manager was seen to smile — he smiled at the comic countryman's pretending to catch a bluebottle, while Mrs. Crummles was making her greatest effect. "Very good, my fine fellow," said Mr. Crummles, shaking his fist at the comic countryman when he came off, "you leave this company next Saturday night."

In the same way, everybody who was on the stage beheld no audience but one individual; everybody played to the London manager. When Mr. Lenville in a sudden burst of passion called the emperor a miscreant, and then biting his glove, said, "But I must dissemble," instead of looking gloomily at the boards and so waiting for his cue, as is proper in such cases, he kept his eye fixed upon the London manager. When Miss Bravassa sang her song at her lover, who according to custom stood ready to shake hands with her between the verses, they

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looked not at each other but at the London manager. Mr. Crummles died point-blank at him; and when the two guards came in to take the body off after a very hard death, it was seen to open its eyes and glance at the London manager. At length the London manager was discovered to be asleep, and shortly after that he woke up and went away, whereupon all the company fell foul of the unhappy comic countryman, declaring that his buffoonery was the sole cause; and Mr. Crummles said that he had put up with it a long time, but that he really couldn't stand it any longer, and therefore would feel obliged by his looking out for another engagement.

All this was the occasion of much amusement to Nicholas, whose only feeling upon the subject was one of sincere satisfaction that the great man went away before he appeared. He went through his part in the two last pieces as briskly as he could, and having been received with unbounded favor and unprecedented applause — so said the bills for next day, which had been printed an hour or two before — he took Smike's arm and walked home to bed.

With the post next morning came a letter from Newman Noggs, very inky, very short, very dirty, very small, and very mysterious, urging Nicholas to return to London instantly; not to lose an instant; to be there that night if possible.

"I will," said Nicholas. "Heaven knows I have remained here for the best, and sorely against my own will; but even now I may have dallied too long. What can have happened? Smike, my good fellow, here — take my purse. Put our things together, and pay what little debts we owe — quick, and we shall be in time for the morning coach. I

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will only tell them that we are going, and will return to you immediately."

So saying, he took his hat, and hurrying away to the lodgings of Mr. Crummles, applied his hand to the knocker with such hearty good-will, that he awakened that gentleman, who was still in bed, and caused Mr. Bulph the pilot to take his morning's pipe very nearly out of his mouth in the extremity of his surprise.

The door being opened, Nicholas ran upstairs without any ceremony, and bursting into the darkened sitting-room on the one-pair front, found that the two Master Crummleses had sprung out of the sofa-bedstead and were putting on their clothes with great rapidity, under the impression that it was the middle of the night, and the next house was on fire.

Before he could undeceive them, Mr. Crummles came down in a flannel gown and nightcap; and to him Nicholas briefly explained that circumstances had occurred which rendered it necessary for him to repair to London immediately.

"So good-by," said Nicholas; "good-by, good-by."

He was half-way downstairs before Mr. Crummles had sufficiently recovered his surprise to gasp out something about the posters.

"I can't help it," replied Nicholas. "Set whatever I may have earned this week against them, or if that will not repay you, say at once what will. Quick, quick."

"We'll cry quits about that," returned Crummles. "But can't we have one last night more?"

"Not an hour — not a minute," replied Nicholas impatiently.

"Won't you stop to say something to Mrs.

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Crummles?" asked the manager, following him down to the door.

"I couldn't stop if it were to prolong my life a score of years," rejoined Nicholas. "Here, take my hand, and with it my hearty thanks. — Oh! that I should have been fooling here!"

Accompanying these words with an impatient stamp upon the ground, he tore himself from the manager's detaining grasp, and darting rapidly down the street was out of sight in an instant.

"Dear me, dear me," said Mr. Crummles, looking wistfully towards the point at which he had just disappeared; "if he only acted like that, what a deal of money he'd draw! He should have kept upon this circuit; he'd have been very useful to me. But he don't know what's good for him. He is an impetuous youth. Young men are rash, very rash."

Mr. Crummles, being in a moralizing mood, might possibly have moralized for some minutes longer if he had not mechanically put his hand towards his waistcoat pocket, where he was accustomed to keep his snuff. The absence of any pocket at all in the usual direction, suddenly recalled to his recollection the fact that he had no waistcoat on; and this leading him to a contemplation of the extreme scantiness of his attire, he shut the door abruptly, and retired upstairs with great precipitation.

Smike had made good speed while Nicholas was absent, and with his help everything was soon ready for their departure. They scarcely stopped to take a morsel of breakfast, and in less than half an hour arrived at the coach-office: quite out of breath with the haste they had made to reach it in time. There were yet a few minutes to spare, so, having secured

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Theatrical emotion of Mr Vincent Crummles.

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the places, Nicholas hurried into a slop-seller's hard by, and bought Smike a great-coat. It would have been rather large for a substantial yeoman, but the shopman averring (and with considerable truth) that it was a most uncommon fit, Nicholas would have purchased it in his impatience if it had been twice the size.

As they hurried up to the coach, which was now in the open street and all ready for starting, Nicholas was not a little astonished to find himself suddenly clutched in a close and violent embrace, which nearly took him off his legs; nor was his amazement at all lessened by hearing the voice of Mr. Crummles exclaim, "It is he — my friend, my friend!"

"Bless my heart," cried Nicholas, struggling in the manager's arms, "what are you about?"

The manager made no reply, but strained him to his breast again, exclaiming as he did so, "Farewell, my noble, my lion-hearted boy!"

In fact, Mr. Crummles, who could never lose any opportunity for professional display, had turned out for the express purpose of taking a public farewell of Nicholas; and to render it the more imposing, he was now, to that young gentleman's most profound annoyance, inflicting upon him a rapid succession of stage embraces, which, as everybody knows, are performed by the embracer's laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection, and looking over it. This Mr. Crummles did in the highest style of melodrama, pouring forth at the same time all the most dismal forms of farewell he could think of, out of the stock pieces. Nor was this all, for the elder Master Crummles was going through a similar ceremony with Smike; while Master Percy Crummles,

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with a very little second-hand camlet cloak, worn theatrically over his left shoulder, stood by, in the attitude of an attendant officer, waiting to convey the two victims to the scaffold.

The lookers-on laughed very heartily, and as it was as well to put a good face upon the matter, Nicholas laughed too when he had succeeded in disengaging himself; and rescuing the astonished Smike, climbed up to the coach roof after him, and kissed his hand in honor of the absent Mrs. Crummles as they rolled away.

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CHAPTER X.

OF RALPH NICKLEBY AND NEWMAN NOGGS, AND SOME WISE PRECAUTIONS, THE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF WHICH WILL APPEAR IN THE SEQUEL.

In blissful unconsciousness that his nephew was hastening at the utmost speed of four good horses towards his sphere of action, and that every passing minute diminished the distance between them, Ralph Nickleby sat that morning occupied in his customary avocations, and yet unable to prevent his thoughts wandering from time to time back to the interview which had taken place between himself and his niece on the previous day. At such intervals, after a few moments of abstraction, Ralph would mutter some peevish interjection, and apply himself with renewed steadiness of purpose to the ledger before him, but again and again the same train of thought came back despite all his efforts to prevent it, confusing him in his calculations, and utterly distracting his attention from the figures over which he bent. At length Ralph laid down his pen, and threw himself back in his chair as though he had made up his mind to allow the obtrusive current of reflection to take its own course, and, by giving it full scope, to rid himself of it effectually.

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"I am not a man to be moved by a pretty face," muttered Ralph sternly. "There is a grinning skull beneath it, and men like me who look and work below the surface see that, and not its delicate covering. And yet I almost like the girl, or should if she had been less proudly and squeamishly brought up. If the boy were drowned or hanged, and the mother dead, this house should be her home. I wish they were, with all my soul."

Notwithstanding the deadly hatred which Ralph felt towards Nicholas, and the bitter contempt with which he sneered at poor Mrs. Nickleby — notwithstanding the baseness with which he had behaved, and was then behaving, and would behave again if his interest prompted him, towards Kate herself — still there was, strange though it may seem, something humanizing and even gentle in his thoughts at that moment. He thought of what his home might be if Kate were there; he placed her in the empty chair, looked upon her, heard her speak; he felt again upon his arm the gentle pressure of the trembling hand; he strewed his costly rooms with the hundred silent tokens of feminine presence and occupation; he came back again to the cold fireside and the silent dreary splendor; and in that one glimpse of a better nature, born as it was in selfish thoughts, the rich man felt himself friendless, childless, and alone. Gold, for the instant, lost its lustre in his eyes, for there were countless treasures of the heart which it could never purchase.

A very slight circumstance was sufficient to banish such reflections from the mind of such a man. As Ralph looked vacantly out across the yard towards the window of the other office, he became suddenly

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aware of the earnest observation of Newman Noggs, who, with his red nose almost touching the glass, feigned to be mending a pen with a rusty fragment of a knife, but was in reality staring at his employer with a countenance of the closest and most eager scrutiny.

Ralph exchanged his dreamy posture for his accustomed business attitude: the face of Newman disappeared, and the train of thought took to flight, all simultaneously, and in an instant.

After a few minutes, Ralph rang his bell. Newman answered the summons, and Ralph raised his eyes stealthily to his face, as if he almost feared to read there a knowledge of his recent thoughts.

There was not the smallest speculation, however, in the countenance of Newman Noggs. If it be possible to imagine a man with two eyes in his head, and both wide open, looking in no direction whatever, and seeing nothing, Newman appeared to be that man while Ralph Nickleby regarded him.

"How now?" growled Ralph.

"Oh!" said Newman, throwing some intelligence into his eyes all at once, and dropping them on his master, "I thought you rang." With which laconic remark Newman turned round and hobbled away.

"Stop!" said Ralph.

Newman stopped; not at all disconcerted.

"I did ring."

"I knew you did."

"Then why do you offer to go if you know that?"

"I thought you rang to say you didn't ring," replied Newman. "You often do."

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"How dare you pry, and peer, and stare at me, sirrah?" demanded Ralph.

"Stare!" cried Newman, "at *you!* Ha, ha!" which was all the explanation Newman deigned to offer.

"Be careful, sir," said Ralph, looking steadily at him. "Let me have no drunken fooling here. Do you see this parcel?"

"It's big enough," rejoined Newman.

"Carry it into the City; to Cross, in Broad Street, and leave it there — quick. Do you hear?"

Newman gave a dogged kind of nod to express an affirmative reply, and, leaving the room for a few seconds, returned with his hat. Having made various ineffective attempts to fit the parcel (which was some two feet square) into the crown thereof, Newman took it under his arm, and after putting on his fingerless gloves with great precision and nicety, keeping his eyes fixed upon Mr. Ralph Nickleby all the time, he adjusted his hat upon his head with as much care, real or pretended, as if it were a brand-new one of the most expensive quality, and at last departed on his errand.

He executed his commission with great promptitude and despatch, only calling at one public-house for half a minute, and even that might be said to be in his way, for he went in at one door and came out at the other; but as he returned and had got so far homewards as the Strand, Newman began to loiter with the uncertain air of a man who has not quite made up his mind whether to halt or go straight forwards. After a very short consideration, the former inclination prevailed, and making towards the point he had had in his mind, Newman knocked

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a modest double knock, or rather a nervous single one, at Miss La Creevy's door.

It was opened by a strange servant, on whom the odd figure of the visitor did not appear to make the most favorable impression possible, inasmuch as she no sooner saw him than she very nearly closed it, and placing herself in the narrow gap, inquired what he wanted. But Newman, merely uttering the monosyllable "Noggs," as if it were some cabalistic word, at sound of which bolts would fly back and doors open, pushed briskly past and gained the door of Miss La Creevy's sitting-room, before the astonished servant could offer any opposition.

"Walk in if you please," said Miss La Creevy in reply to the sound of Newman's knuckles; and in he walked accordingly.

"Bless us!" cried Miss La Creevy, starting as Newman bolted in; "what did you want, sir?"

"You have forgotten me," said Newman, with an inclination of the head. "I wonder at that. That nobody should remember me who knew me in other days, is natural enough; but there are few people who, seeing me once, forget me *now*." He glanced, as he spoke, at his shabby clothes and paralytic limb, and slightly shook his head.

"I did forget you, I declare," said Miss La Creevy, rising to receive Newman, who met her halfway, "and I am ashamed of myself for doing so; for you are a kind, good creature, Mr. Noggs. Sit down and tell me all about Miss Nickleby. Poor dear thing! I haven't seen her for this many a week."

"How's that?" asked Newman.

"Why, the truth is, Mr. Noggs," said Miss La

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Creevy, "that I have been out on a visit — the first visit I have made for fifteen years."

"That is a long time," said Newman sadly.

"So it is a very long time to look back upon in years, though, somehow or other, thank Heaven, the solitary days roll away peacefully and happily enough," replied the miniature-painter. "I have a brother, Mr. Noggs — the only relation I have — and all that time I never saw him once. Not that we ever quarrelled, but he was apprenticed down in the country, and he got married there, and new ties and affections springing up about him, he forgot a poor little woman like me, as it was very reasonable he should, you know. Don't suppose that I complain about that, because I always said to myself, 'It is very natural; poor dear John is making his way in the world, and has a wife to tell his cares and troubles to, and children now to play about him, so God bless him and them, and send we may all meet together one day where we shall part no more.' But what do you think, Mr. Noggs," said the miniature-painter, brightening up and clapping her hands, "of that very same brother coming up to London at last, and never resting till he found me out; what do you think of his coming here and sitting down in that very chair, and crying like a child because he was so glad to see me — what do you think of his insisting on taking me down all the way into the country to his own house (quite a sumptuous place, Mr. Noggs, with a large garden and I don't know how many fields, and a man in livery waiting at table, and cows and horses and pigs and I don't know what besides), and making me stay a whole month, and pressing me to stop

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there all my life — yes, all my life — and so did his wife, and so did the children — and there were four of them, and one, the eldest girl of all, they — they had named her after me eight good years before, they had indeed. I never was so happy; in all my life I never was!" The worthy soul hid her face in her handkerchief, and sobbed aloud; for it was the first opportunity she had had of unburdening her heart, and it would have its way.

"But bless my life," said Miss La Creevy, wiping her eyes after a short pause, and cramming her handkerchief into her pocket with great bustle and despatch; "what a foolish creature I must seem to you, Mr. Noggs! I shouldn't have said anything about it, only I wanted to explain to you how it was I hadn't seen Miss Nickleby."

"Have you seen the old lady?" asked Newman.

"You mean Mrs. Nickleby?" said Miss La Creevy. "Then I tell you what, Mr. Noggs, if you want to keep in the good books in that quarter, you had better not call her the old lady any more, for I suspect she wouldn't be best pleased to hear you. Yes, I went there the night before last, but she was quite on the high ropes about something, and was so grand and mysterious, that I couldn't make anything of her: so, to tell you the truth, I took it into my head to be grand too, and came away in state. I thought she would have come round again before this, but she hasn't been here."

"About Miss Nickleby —" said Newman.

"Why, she was here twice while I was away," returned Miss La Creevy. "I was afraid she mightn't like to have me calling on her among those great folks in What's-its-name Place, so I

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thought I'd wait a day or two, and if I didn't see her, write."

"Ah!" exclaimed Newman, cracking his fingers.

"However, I want to hear all the news about them from you," said Miss La Creevy. "How is the old rough and tough monster of Golden Square? Well, of course; such people always are. I don't mean how is he in health, but how is he going on: how is he behaving himself?"

"Damn him!" cried Newman, dashing his cherished hat on the floor; "like a false hound."

"Gracious, Mr. Noggs, you quite terrify me!" exclaimed Miss La Creevy, turning pale.

"I should have spoiled his features yesterday afternoon if I could have afforded it," said Newman, moving restlessly about, and shaking his fist at a portrait of Mr. Canning over the mantel-piece. "I was very near it. I was obliged to put my hands in my pockets, and keep 'em there very tight. I shall do it some day in that little back-parlor, I know I shall. I should have done it before now, if I hadn't been afraid of making bad worse. I shall double-lock myself in with him and have it out before I die, I'm quite certain of it."

"I shall scream if you don't compose yourself, Mr. Noggs," said Miss La Creevy; "I'm sure I sha'n't be able to help it."

"Never mind," rejoined Newman, darting violently to and fro. "He's coming up to-night: I wrote to tell him. He little thinks I know; he little thinks I care. Cunning scoundrel! he don't think that. Not he, not he. Never mind, I'll thwart him — *I*, Newman Noggs. Ho, ho, the rascal!"

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Lashing himself up to an extravagant pitch of fury, Newman Noggs jerked himself about the room with the most eccentric motion ever beheld in a human being: now sparring at the little miniatures on the wall, and now giving himself violent thumps on the head, as if to heighten the delusion, until he sank down in his former seat quite breathless and exhausted.

"There," said Newman, picking up his hat; "that's done me good. Now I'm better, and I'll tell you all about it."

It took some little time to reassure Miss La Creevy, who had been almost frightened out of her senses by this remarkable demonstration; but that done, Newman faithfully related all that had passed in the interview between Kate and her uncle, prefacing his narrative with a statement of his previous suspicions on the subject, and his reasons for forming them; and concluding with a communication of the step he had taken in secretly writing to Nicholas.

Though little Miss La Creevy's indignation was not so singularly displayed as Newman's, it was scarcely inferior in violence and intensity. Indeed, if Ralph Nickleby had happened to make his appearance in the room at that moment, there is some doubt whether he would not have found Miss La Creevy a more dangerous opponent than even Newman Noggs himself.

"God forgive me for saying so," said Miss La Creevy, as a wind-up to all her expressions of anger, "but I really feel as if I could stick this into him with pleasure."

It was not a very awful weapon that Miss La Creevy held, it being in fact nothing more nor less

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than a black-lead pencil; but discovering her mistake, the little portrait-painter exchanged it for a mother-of-pearl fruit knife, wherewith, in proof of her desperate thoughts, she made a lunge as she spoke, which would have scarcely disturbed the crumb of a half-quartern loaf.

"She won't stop where she is after to-night," said Newman. "That's a comfort."

"Stop!" cried Miss La Creevy, "she should have left there, weeks ago."

"—If we had known of this," rejoined Newman. "But we didn't. Nobody could properly interfere but her mother or brother. The mother's weak—poor thing—weak. The dear young man will be here to-night."

"Heart alive!" cried Miss La Creevy. "He will do something desperate, Mr. Noggs, if you tell him all at once."

Newman left off rubbing his hands, and assumed a thoughtful look.

"Depend upon it," said Miss La Creevy earnestly, "if you are not very careful in breaking out the truth to him, he will do some violence upon his uncle, or one of these men, that will bring some terrible calamity upon his own head, and grief and sorrow to us all."

"I never thought of that," rejoined Newman, his countenance falling more and more. "I came to ask you to receive his sister in case he brought her here, but—"

"But this is a matter of much greater importance," interrupted Miss La Creevy; "that you might have been sure of before you came, but the end of this nobody can foresee, unless you are very guarded and careful."

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"What *can* I do?" cried Newman, scratching his head with an air of great vexation and perplexity. "If he was to talk of pistolling 'em all, I should be obliged to say, 'Certainly — serve 'em right.'"

Miss La Creevy could not suppress a small shriek on hearing this, and instantly set about extorting a solemn pledge from Newman that he would use his utmost endeavors to pacify the wrath of Nicholas; which, after some demur, was conceded. They then consulted together on the safest and surest mode of communicating to him the circumstances which had rendered his presence necessary.

"He must have time to cool before he can possibly do anything," said Miss La Creevy. "That is of the greatest consequence. He must not be told until late at night."

"But he'll be in town between six and seven this evening," replied Newman. "*I* can't keep it from him when he asks me."

"Then you must go out, Mr. Noggs," said Miss La Creevy. "You can easily have been kept away by business, and must not return till nearly midnight."

"Then he will come straight here," retorted Newman.

"So I suppose," observed Miss La Creevy; "but he won't find me at home, for I'll go straight to the City the instant you leave me, make up matters with Mrs. Nickleby, and take her away to the theatre, so that he may not even know where his sister lives."

Upon further discussion, this appeared the safest and most feasible mode of proceeding that could possibly be adopted. Therefore it was finally

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determined that matters should be so arranged, and Newman, after listening to many supplementary cautions and entreaties, took his leave of Miss La Creevy and trudged back to Golden Square; ruminating as he went upon a vast number of possibilities and impossibilities which crowded upon his brain, and arose out of the conversation that had just terminated.

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CHAPTER XI.

RELATING CHIEFLY TO SOME REMARKABLE CONVERSATION, AND SOME REMARKABLE PROCEEDINGS TO WHICH IT GIVES RISE.

"LONDON at last!" cried Nicholas, throwing back his great-coat and rousing Smike from a long nap. "It seemed to me as though we should never reach it."

"And yet you came along at a tidy pace too," observed the coachman, looking over his shoulder at Nicholas with no very pleasant expression of countenance.

"Ay, I know that," was the reply; "but I have been very anxious to be at my journey's end, and that makes the way seem long."

"Well," remarked the coachman, "if the way seemed long with such cattle as you've sat behind, you *must* have been most uncommon anxious;" and so saying, he let out his whip-lash and touched up a little boy on the calves of his legs by way of emphasis.

They rattled on through the noisy, bustling, crowded streets of London, now displaying long double rows of brightly burning lamps, dotted here and there with the chemists' glaring lights, and

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illuminated besides with the brilliant flood that streamed from the windows of the shops, where sparkling jewelry, silks and velvets of the richest colors, the most inviting delicacies, and most sumptuous articles of luxurious ornament, succeeded each other in rich and glittering profusion. Streams of people apparently without end poured on and on, jostling each other in the crowd and hurrying forward, scarcely seeming to notice the riches that surrounded them on every side; while vehicles of all shapes and makes, mingled up together in one moving mass, like running water, lent their ceaseless roar to swell the noise and tumult.

As they dashed by the quickly changing and ever-varying objects, it was curious to observe in what a strange procession they passed before the eye. Emporiums of splendid dresses, the materials brought from every quarter of the world; tempting stores of everything to stimulate and pamper the sated appetite and give new relish to the oft-repeated feast; vessels of burnished gold and silver, wrought into every exquisite form of vase, and dish, and goblet; guns, swords, pistols, and patent engines of destruction; screws and irons for the crooked, clothes for the newly born, drugs for the sick, coffins for the dead, and churchyards for the buried — all these jumbled each with the other and flocking side by side, seemed to flit by in motley dance like the fantastic groups of the old Dutch painter, and with the same stern moral for the unheeding restless crowd.

Nor were there wanting objects in the crowd itself to give new point and purpose to the shifting scene. The rags of the squalid ballad-singer fluttered in the rich light that showed the goldsmith's treas-

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ures, pale and pinched-up faces hovered about the windows where was tempting food, hungry eyes wandered over the profusion guarded by one thin sheet of brittle glass — an iron wall to them; half-naked, shivering figures stopped to gaze at Chinese shawls and golden stuffs of India. There was a christening party at the largest coffin-maker's, and a funeral hatchment had stopped some great improvements in the bravest mansion. Life and death went hand in hand; wealth and poverty stood side by side; repletion and starvation laid them down together.

But it was London; and the old country lady inside, who had put her head out of the coach-window a mile or two this side Kingston, and cried out to the driver that she was sure he must have passed it and forgotten to set her down, was satisfied at last.

Nicholas engaged beds for himself and Smike at the inn where the coach stopped, and repaired, without the delay of another moment, to the lodgings of Newman Noggs; for his anxiety and impatience had increased with every succeeding minute, and were almost beyond control.

There was a fire in Newman's garret, and a candle had been left burning; the floor was cleanly swept, the room was as comfortably arranged as such a room could be, and meat and drink were placed in order upon the table. Everything bespoke the affectionate care and attention of Newman Noggs, but Newman himself was not there.

"Do you know what time he will be home?" inquired Nicholas, tapping at the door of Newman's front neighbor.

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"Ah, Mr. Johnson!" said Crowl, presenting himself. "Welcome, sir. How well you're looking! I never could have believed —"

"Pardon me," interposed Nicholas. "My question — I am extremely anxious to know."

"Why, he has a troublesome affair of business," replied Crowl, "and will not be home before twelve o'clock. He was very unwilling to go, I can tell you, but there was no help for it. However, he left word that you were to make yourself comfortable till he came back, and that I was to entertain you, which I shall be very glad to do."

In proof of his extreme readiness to exert himself for the general entertainment, Mr. Crowl drew a chair to the table as he spoke, and helping himself plentifully to the cold meat, invited Nicholas and Smike to follow his example.

Disappointed and uneasy, Nicholas could touch no food, so, after he had seen Smike comfortably established at the table, he walked out (despite a great many dissuasions uttered by Mr. Crowl with his mouth full), and left Smike to detain Newman in case he returned first.

As Miss La Creevy had anticipated, Nicholas betook himself straight to her house. Finding her from home, he debated within himself for some time whether he should go to his mother's residence, and so compromise her with Ralph Nickleby. Fully persuaded, however, that Newman would not have solicited him to return unless there was some strong reason which required his presence at home, he resolved to go there, and hastened eastwards with all speed.

Mrs. Nickleby would not be at home, the girl

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said, until past twelve or later. She believed Miss Nickleby was well, but she didn't live at home now, nor did she come home except very seldom. She couldn't say where she was stopping, but it was not at Madame Mantalini's — she was sure of that.

With his heart beating violently, and apprehending he knew not what disaster, Nicholas returned to where he had left Smike. Newman had not been home. He wouldn't be, till twelve o'clock; there was no chance of it. Was there no possibility of sending to fetch him if it were only for an instant, or forwarding to him one line of writing to which he might return a verbal reply? That was quite impracticable. He was not at Golden Square, and probably had been sent to execute some commission at a distance.

Nicholas tried to remain quietly where he was, but he felt so nervous and excited that he could not sit still. He seemed to be losing time unless he was moving. It was an absurd fancy, he knew, but he was wholly unable to resist it. So, he took up his hat and rambled out again.

He strolled westward this time, pacing the long streets with hurried footsteps, and agitated by a thousand misgivings and apprehensions which he could not overcome. He passed into Hyde Park, now silent and deserted, and increased his rate of walking as if in the hope of leaving his thoughts behind. They crowded upon him more thickly, however, now there were no passing objects to attract his attention; and the one idea was always uppermost, that some stroke of ill-fortune must have occurred so calamitous in its nature that all were fearful of disclosing it to him. The old ques-

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tion arose again and again — What could it be? Nicholas walked till he was weary, but was not one bit the wiser; and indeed he came out of the Park at last a great deal more confused and perplexed than when he went in.

He had taken scarcely anything to eat or drink since early in the morning, and felt quite worn out and exhausted. As he returned languidly towards the point from which he had started, along one of the thoroughfares which lie between Park Lane and Bond Street, he passed a handsome hotel, before which he stopped mechanically.

"An expensive place, I dare say," thought Nicholas; "but a pint of wine and a biscuit are no great debauch wherever they are had. And yet I don't know."

He walked on a few steps, but looking wistfully down the long vista of gas-lamps before him, and thinking how long it would take to reach the end of it — and being besides in that kind of mood in which a man is most disposed to yield to his first impulse — and being, besides, strongly attracted to the hotel, in part by curiosity, and in part by some odd mixture of feelings which he would have been troubled to define — Nicholas turned back again, and walked into the coffee-room.

It was very handsomely furnished. The walls were ornamented with the choicest specimens of French paper, enriched with a gilded cornice of elegant design. The floor was covered with a rich carpet; and two superb mirrors, one above the chimney-piece and one at the opposite end of the room reaching from floor to ceiling, multiplied the other beauties and added new ones of their own to

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Nicholas attracted by the mention of his Sisters name in the Coffee Room.

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enhance the general effect. There was a rather noisy party of four gentlemen in a box by the fireplace, and only two other persons present — both elderly gentlemen, and both alone.

Observing all this in the first comprehensive glance with which a stranger surveys a place that is new to him, Nicholas sat himself down in the box next to the noisy party, with his back towards them, and postponing his order for a pint of claret until such time as the waiter and one of the elderly gentlemen should have settled a disputed question relative to the price of an item in the bill of fare, took up a newspaper and began to read.

He had not read twenty lines, and was in truth half dozing, when he was startled by the mention of his sister's name. "Little Kate Nickleby" were the words that caught his ear. He raised his head in amazement, and as he did so, saw by the reflection in the opposite glass, that two of the party behind him had risen and were standing before the fire. "It must have come from one of them," thought Nicholas. He waited to hear more with a countenance of some indignation, for the tone of speech had been anything but respectful, and the appearance of the individual whom he presumed to have been the speaker was coarse and swaggering.

This person — so Nicholas observed in the same glance at the mirror which had enabled him to see his face — was standing with his back to the fire conversing with a younger man, who stood with his back to the company, wore his hat, and was adjusting his shirt-collar by the aid of the glass. They spoke in whispers, now and then bursting into a loud laugh, but Nicholas could catch no repetition

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of the words, nor anything sounding at all like the words, which had attracted his attention.

At length the two resumed their seats, and more wine being ordered, the party grew louder in their mirth. Still there was no reference made to anybody with whom he was acquainted, and Nicholas became persuaded that his excited fancy had either imagined the sounds altogether, or converted some other words into the name which had been so much in his thoughts.

"It is remarkable too," thought Nicholas: "if it had been 'Kate' or 'Kate Nickleby,' I should not have been so much surprised; but 'little Kate Nickleby'!"

The wine coming at the moment prevented his finishing the sentence. He swallowed a glassful and took up the paper again. At that instant—

"Little Kate Nickleby!" cried the voice behind him.

"I was right," muttered Nicholas as the paper fell from his hand. "And it was the man I supposed."

"As there was a proper objection to drinking her in heel-taps," said the voice, "we'll give her the first glass in the new magnum. Little Kate Nickleby!"

"Little Kate Nickleby," cried the other three. And the glasses were set down empty.

Keenly alive to the tone and manner of this slight and careless mention of his sister's name in a public place, Nicholas fired at once; but he kept himself quiet by a great effort, and did not even turn his head.

"The jade!" said the same voice which had spoken before. "She's a true Nickleby — a worthy

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imitator of her old uncle Ralph — she hangs back to be more sought after — so does he; nothing to be got out of Ralph unless you follow him up, and then the money comes doubly welcome, and the bargain doubly hard, for you're impatient and he isn't. Oh! infernal cunning."

"Infernal cunning," echoed two voices.

Nicholas was in a perfect agony as the two elderly gentlemen opposite rose one after the other and went away, lest they should be the means of his losing one word of what was said. But the conversation was suspended as they withdrew, and resumed with even greater freedom when they had left the room.

"I am afraid," said the younger gentleman, "that the old woman has grown jea-a-lous, and locked her up. Upon my soul it looks like it."

"If they quarrel and little Nickleby goes home to her mother, so much the better," said the first. "I can do anything with the old lady. She'll believe anything I tell her."

"Egad that's true," returned the other voice. "Ha, ha, ha! Poor deyvle!"

The laugh was taken up by the two voices which always came in together, and became general at Mrs. Nickleby's expense. Nicholas turned burning hot with rage, but he commanded himself for the moment, and waited to hear more.

What he heard need not be repeated here. Suffice it that as the wine went round he heard enough to acquaint him with the characters and designs of those whose conversation he overheard; to possess him with the full extent of Ralph's villainy, and the real reason of his own presence being required

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in London. He heard all this and more. He heard his sister's sufferings derided, and her virtuous conduct jeered at and brutally misconstrued; he heard her name bandied from mouth to mouth, and herself made the subject of coarse and insolent wagers, free speech, and licentious jesting.

The man who had spoken first, led the conversation, and indeed almost engrossed it, being only stimulated from time to time by some slight observation from one or other of his companions. To him then Nicholas addressed himself when he was sufficiently composed to stand before the party, and force the words from his parched and scorching throat.

"Let me have a word with you, sir," said Nicholas.

"With me, sir?" retorted Sir Mulberry Hawk, eying him in disdainful surprise.

"I said with you," replied Nicholas, speaking with great difficulty, for his passion choked him.

"A mysterious stranger, upon my soul!" exclaimed Sir Mulberry, raising his wine-glass to his lips, and looking round upon his friends.

"Will you step apart with me for a few minutes, or do you refuse?" said Nicholas sternly.

Sir Mulberry merely paused in the act of drinking, and bade him either name his business or leave the table.

Nicholas drew a card from his pocket, and threw it before him.

"There, sir," said Nicholas; "my business you will guess."

A momentary expression of astonishment, not unmixed with some confusion, appeared in the face of Sir Mulberry as he read the name; but he sub-

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dued it in an instant, and tossing the card to Lord Verisopht, who sat opposite, drew a toothpick from a glass before him, and very leisurely applied it to his mouth.

"Your name and address?" said Nicholas, turning paler as his passion kindled.

"I shall give you neither," replied Sir Mulberry.

"If there is a gentleman in this party," said Nicholas, looking round and scarcely able to make his white lips form the words, "he will acquaint me with the name and residence of this man."

There was a dead silence.

"I am the brother of the young lady who has been the subject of conversation here," said Nicholas. "I denounce this person as a liar, and impeach him as a coward. If he has a friend here, he will save him the disgrace of the paltry attempt to conceal his name — an utterly useless one — for I will find it out, nor leave him until I have."

Sir Mulberry looked at him contemptuously, and, addressing his companions, said, —

"Let the fellow talk, I have nothing serious to say to boys of his station; and his pretty sister shall save him a broken head, if he talks till midnight."

"You are a base and spiritless scoundrel!" said Nicholas, "and shall be proclaimed so to the world. I *will* know you; I will follow you home if you walk the streets till morning."

Sir Mulberry's hand involuntarily closed upon the decanter, and he seemed for an instant about to launch it at the head of his challenger. But he only filled his glass, and laughed in derision.

Nicholas sat himself down, directly opposite to

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the party, and summoning the waiter, paid his bill.

"Do you know that person's name?" he inquired of the man in an audible voice; pointing out Sir Mulberry as he put the question.

Sir Mulberry laughed again, and the two voices which had always spoken together, echoed the laugh; but rather feebly.

"That gentleman, sir?" replied the waiter, who, no doubt, knew his cue, and answered with just as little respect, and just as much impertinence as he could safely show: "no, sir, I do not, sir."

"Here, you sir," cried Sir Mulberry, as the man was retiring; "do you know *that* person's name?"

"Name, sir? No, sir."

"Then you'll find it there," said Sir Mulberry, throwing Nicholas's card towards him; "and when you have made yourself master of it, put that piece of pasteboard in the fire — do you hear me?"

The man grinned, and, looking doubtfully at Nicholas, compromised the matter by sticking the card in the chimney-glass. Having done this, he retired.

Nicholas folded his arms, and biting his lip, sat perfectly quiet; sufficiently expressing by his manner, however, a firm determination to carry his threat of following Sir Mulberry home, into steady execution.

It was evident from the tone in which the younger member of the party appeared to remonstrate with his friend, that he objected to this course of proceeding, and urged him to comply with the request which Nicholas had made. Sir Mulberry, however, who was not quite sober, and who was in a sullen

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and dogged state of obstinacy, soon silenced the representations of his weak young friend, and further seemed — as if to save himself from a repetition of them — to insist on being left alone. However this might have been, the young gentleman and the two who had always spoken together, actually rose to go after a short interval, and presently retired, leaving their friend alone with Nicholas.

It will be very readily supposed that to one in the condition of Nicholas, the minutes appeared to move with leaden wings indeed, and that their progress did not seem the more rapid from the monotonous ticking of a French clock, or the shrill sound of its little bell which told the quarters. But there he sat; and in his old seat on the opposite side of the room reclined Sir Mulberry Hawk, with his legs upon the cushion, and his handkerchief thrown negligently over his knees: finishing his magnum of claret with the utmost coolness and indifference.

Thus they remained in perfect silence for upwards of an hour — Nicholas would have thought for three hours at least, but that the little bell had only gone four times. Twice or thrice he looked angrily and impatiently round; but there was Sir Mulberry in the same attitude, putting his glass to his lips from time to time, and looking vacantly at the wall, as if he were wholly ignorant of the presence of any living person.

At length he yawned, stretched himself, and rose; walked coolly to the glass, and having surveyed himself therein, turned round and honored Nicholas with a long and contemptuous stare. Nicholas stared again with right good will; Sir Mulberry shrugged his shoulders, smiled slightly, rang the

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bell, and ordered the waiter to help him on with his great-coat.

The man did so, and held the door open.

"Don't wait," said Sir Mulberry, and they were alone again.

Sir Mulberry took several turns up and down the room, whistling carelessly all the time; stopped to finish the last glass of claret which he had poured out a few minutes before, walked again, put on his hat, adjusted it by the glass, drew on his gloves, and, at last, walked slowly out. Nicholas, who had been fuming and chafing until he was nearly wild, darted from his seat, and followed him — so closely, that before the door had swung upon its hinges after Sir Mulberry's passing out, they stood side by side in the street together.

There was a private cabriolet in waiting; the groom opened the apron, and jumped out to the horse's head.

"Will you make yourself known to me?" asked Nicholas in a suppressed voice.

"No," replied the other fiercely, and confirming the refusal with an oath. "No."

"If you trust to your horse's speed, you will find yourself mistaken," said Nicholas. "I will accompany you. By Heaven I will, if I hang on to the foot-board."

"You shall be horsewhipped if you do," returned Sir Mulberry.

"You are a villain," said Nicholas.

"You are an errand-boy for aught I know," said Sir Mulberry Hawk.

"I am the son of a country gentleman," returned Nicholas, "your equal in birth and education, and

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your superior, I trust, in everything besides. I tell you again, Miss Nickleby is my sister. Will you or will you not answer for your unmanly and brutal conduct?"

"To a proper champion — yes. To you — no," returned Sir Mulberry, taking the reins in his hand. "Stand out of the way, dog. William, let go her head."

"You had better not," cried Nicholas, springing on the step as Sir Mulberry jumped in, and catching at the reins. "He has no command over the horse, mind. You shall not go — you shall not, I swear — till you have told me who you are."

The groom hesitated, for the mare, who was a high-spirited animal and thoroughbred, plunged so violently that he could scarcely hold her.

"Leave go, I tell you!" thundered his master.

The man obeyed. The animal reared and plunged as though it would dash the carriage into a thousand pieces, but Nicholas, blind to all sense of danger, and conscious of nothing but his fury, still maintained his place and his hold upon the reins.

"Will you unclasp your hand?"

"Will you tell me who you are?"

"No!"

"No!"

In less time than the quickest tongue could tell it, these words were exchanged, and Sir Mulberry, shortening his whip, applied it furiously to the head and shoulders of Nicholas. It was broken in the struggle; Nicholas gained the heavy handle, and with it laid open one side of his antagonist's face from the eye to the lip. He saw the gash; knew that the mare had darted off at a wild mad

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gallop; a hundred lights danced in his eyes, and he felt himself flung violently upon the ground.

He was giddy and sick, but staggered to his feet directly, roused by the loud shouts of the men who were tearing up the street, and screaming to those ahead to clear the way. He was conscious of a torrent of people rushing quickly by — looking up, could discern the cabriolet whirled along the foot-pavement with frightful rapidity — then heard a loud cry, the smashing of some heavy body, and the breaking of glass — and then the crowd closed in in the distance, and he could see or hear no more.

The general attention had been entirely directed from himself to the person in the carriage, and he was quite alone. Rightly judging that under such circumstances it would be madness to follow, he turned down a by-street in search of the nearest coach-stand, finding after a minute or two that he was reeling like a drunken man, and aware for the first time of a stream of blood that was trickling down his face and breast.

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CHAPTER XII.

IN WHICH MR. RALPH NICKLEBY IS RELIEVED, BY A VERY EXPEDITIOUS PROCESS, FROM ALL COMMERCE WITH HIS RELATIONS.

Smike and Newman Noggs, who in his impatience had returned home long before the time agreed upon, sat before the fire, listening anxiously to every footstep on the stairs, and the slightest sound that stirred within the house, for the approach of Nicholas. Time had worn on, and it was growing late. He had promised to be back in an hour; and his prolonged absence began to excite considerable alarm in the minds of both, as was abundantly testified by the blank looks they cast upon each other at every new disappointment.

At length a coach was heard to stop, and Newman ran out to light Nicholas up the stairs. Beholding him in the trim described at the conclusion of the last chapter, he stood aghast in wonder and consternation.

"Don't be alarmed," said Nicholas, hurrying him back into the room. "There is no harm done, beyond what a basin of water can repair."

"No harm!" cried Newman, passing his hands hastily over the back and arms of Nicholas, as if

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to assure himself that he had broken no bones. "What have you been doing?"

"I know all," interrupted Nicholas; "I have heard a part, and guessed the rest. But before I remove one jot of these stains, I must hear the whole from you. You see I am collected. My resolution is taken. Now, my good friend, speak out; for the time for any palliation or concealment is past, and nothing will avail Ralph Nickleby now."

"Your dress is torn in several places; you walk lame, and I am sure you are suffering pain," said Newman. "Let me see to your hurts first."

"I have no hurts to see to, beyond a little soreness and stiffness that will soon pass off," said Nicholas, seating himself with some difficulty. "But if I had fractured every limb, and still preserved my senses, you should not bandage one till you had told me what I have the right to know. Come," said Nicholas, giving his hand to Noggs. "You had a sister of your own, you told me once, who died before you fell into misfortune. Now think of her, and tell me, Newman."

"Yes, I will, I will," said Noggs. "I'll tell you the whole truth."

Newman did so. Nicholas nodded his head from time to time, as it corroborated the particulars he had already gleaned; but he fixed his eyes upon the fire, and did not look round once.

His recital ended, Newman insisted upon his young friend's stripping off his coat and allowing whatever injuries he had received to be properly tended. Nicholas, after some opposition, at length consented, and, while some pretty severe bruises on his arms and shoulders were being rubbed with oil

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and vinegar, and various other efficacious remedies which Newman borrowed from the different lodgers, related in what manner they had been received. The recital made a strong impression on the warm imagination of Newman; for when Nicholas came to the violent part of the quarrel, he rubbed so hard as to occasion him the most exquisite pain, which he would not have exhibited, however, for the world, it being perfectly clear that, for the moment, Newman was operating on Sir Mulberry Hawk, and had quite lost sight of his real patient.

This martyrdom over, Nicholas arranged with Newman that while he was otherwise occupied next morning, arrangements should be made for his mother's immediately quitting her present residence, and also for despatching Miss La Creevy to break the intelligence to her. He then wrapped himself in Smike's great-coat, and repaired to the inn where they were to pass the night, and where (after writing a few lines to Ralph, the delivery of which was to be intrusted to Newman next day) he endeavored to obtain the repose of which he stood so much in need.

Drunken men, they say, may roll down precipices, and be quite unconscious of any serious personal inconvenience when their reason returns. The remark may possibly apply to injuries received in other kinds of violent excitement: certain it is, that although Nicholas experienced some pain on first awakening next morning, he sprung out of bed as the clock struck seven, with very little difficulty, and was soon as much on the alert as if nothing had occurred.

Merely looking into Smike's room, and telling him

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that Newman Noggs would call for him very shortly, Nicholas descended into the street, and calling a hackney coach, bade the man drive to Mrs. Wititterly's, according to the direction which Newman had given him on the previous night.

It wanted a quarter to eight when they reached Cadogan Place. Nicholas began to fear that no one might be stirring at that early hour, when he was relieved by the sight of a female servant, employed in cleaning the door-steps. By this functionary he was referred to the doubtful page, who appeared with dishevelled hair and a very warm and glossy face, as of a page who had just got out of bed.

By this young gentleman he was informed that Miss Nickleby was then taking her morning's walk in the gardens before the house. On the question being propounded whether he could go and find her, the page desponded and thought not; but being stimulated with a shilling, the page grew sanguine and thought he could.

"Say to Miss Nickleby that her brother is here, and in great haste to see her," said Nicholas.

The plated buttons disappeared with an alacrity most unusual to them, and Nicholas paced the room in a state of feverish agitation which made the delay even of a minute insupportable. He soon heard a light footstep which he well knew, and before he could advance to meet her, Kate had fallen on his neck and burst into tears.

"My darling girl," said Nicholas as he embraced her. "How pale you are!"

"I have been so unhappy here, dear brother," sobbed poor Kate; "so very, very miserable. Do not leave me here, dear Nicholas, or I shall die of a broken heart."

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"I will leave you nowhere," answered Nicholas — "never again, Kate," he cried, moved in spite of himself as he folded her to his heart. "Tell me that I acted for the best. Tell me that we parted because I feared to bring misfortune on your head; that it was a trial to me no less than to yourself, and that if I did wrong it was in ignorance of the world and unknowingly."

"Why should I tell you what we know so well?" returned Kate soothingly. "Nicholas — dear Nicholas — how can you give way thus?"

"It is such bitter reproach to me to know what you have undergone," returned her brother; "to see you so much altered, and yet so kind and patient. God!" cried Nicholas, clenching his fist and suddenly changing his tone and manner, "it sets my whole blood on fire again. You must leave here with me directly; you should not have slept here last night, but that I knew all this too late. To whom can I speak, before we drive away?"

This question was most opportunely put, for at that instant Mr. Wititterly walked in, and to him Kate introduced her brother, who at once announced his purpose, and the impossibility of deferring it.

"The quarter's notice," said Mr. Wititterly, with the gravity of a man on the right side, "is not yet half expired. Therefore —"

"Therefore," interposed Nicholas, "the quarter's salary must be lost, sir. You will excuse this extreme haste, but circumstances require that I should immediately remove my sister, and I have not a moment's time to lose. Whatever she brought here I will send for, if you will allow me, in the course of the day."

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Mr. Wititterly bowed, but offered no opposition to Kate's immediate departure; with which, indeed, he was rather gratified than otherwise, Sir Tumley Snuffim having given it as his opinion, that she rather disagreed with Mrs. Wititterly's constitution.

"With regard to the trifle of salary that is due," said Mr. Wititterly, "I will" — here he was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing — "I will — owe it to Miss Nickleby."

Mr. Wititterly, it should be observed, was accustomed to owe small accounts, and to leave them owing. All men have some little pleasant way of their own; and this was Mr. Wititterly's.

"If you please," said Nicholas. And once more offering a hurried apology for so sudden a departure, he hurried Kate into the vehicle, and bade the man drive with all speed into the City.

To the City they went accordingly, with all the speed the hackney coach could make; and as the horses happened to live at Whitechapel and to be in the habit of taking their breakfast there, when they breakfasted at all, they performed the journey with greater expedition than could reasonably have been expected.

Nicholas sent Kate upstairs a few minutes before him, that his unlooked-for appearance might not alarm his mother, and when the way had been paved, presented himself with much duty and affection. Newman had not been idle, for there was a little cart at the door, and the effects were hurrying out already.

Now, Mrs. Nickleby was not the sort of person to be told anything in a hurry, or rather to compre-

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hend anything of peculiar delicacy or importance on a short notice. Wherefore, although the good lady had been subjected to a full hour's preparation by little Miss La Creevy, and was now addressed in most lucid terms both by Nicholas and his sister, she was in a state of singular bewilderment and confusion, and could by no means be made to comprehend the necessity of such hurried proceedings.

"Why don't you ask your uncle, my dear Nicholas, what he can possibly mean by it?" said Mrs. Nickleby.

"My dear mother," returned Nicholas, "the time for talking has gone by. There is but one step to take, and that is to cast him off with the scorn and indignation he deserves. Your own honor and good name demand that, after the discovery of his vile proceedings, you should not be beholden to him one hour, even for the shelter of these bare walls."

"To be sure," said Mrs. Nickleby, crying bitterly, "he is a brute, a monster; and the walls are very bare, and want painting too, and I have had this ceiling whitewashed at the expense of eighteenpence, which is a very distressing thing, considering that it is so much gone into your uncle's pocket. I never could have believed it — never."

"Nor I, nor anybody else," said Nicholas.

"Lord bless my life!" exclaimed Mrs. Nickleby. "To think that that Sir Mulberry Hawk should be such an abandoned wretch as Miss La Creevy says he is, Nicholas, my dear; when I was congratulating myself every day on his being an admirer of our dear Kate's, and thinking what a thing it would be for the family if he was to become connected with us, and use his interest to get you some profit-

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able government place. There are very good places to be got about the court, I know; for a friend of ours (Miss Cropley, at Exeter, my dear Kate, you recollect), he had one, and I know that it was the chief part of his duty to wear silk stockings, and a bag wig like a black watch-pocket; and to think that it should come to this after all — oh, dear, dear, it's enough to kill one, that it is!" With which expressions of sorrow, Mrs. Nickleby gave fresh vent to her grief, and wept piteously.

As Nicholas and his sister were by this time compelled to superintend the removal of the few articles of furniture, Miss La Creevy devoted herself to the consolation of the matron, and observed with great kindness of manner that she must really make an effort and cheer up.

"Oh, I dare say, Miss La Creevy," returned Mrs. Nickleby, with a petulance not unnatural in her unhappy circumstances, "it's very easy to say cheer up, but if you had as many occasions to cheer up as I have had — And there," said Mrs. Nickleby, stopping short. "Think of Mr. Pyke and Mr. Pluck, two of the most perfect gentlemen that ever lived, what am I to say to them — what can I say to them? Why, if I was to say to them, 'I'm told your friend Sir Mulberry is a base wretch,' they'd laugh at me."

"They will laugh no more at us, I take it," said Nicholas, advancing. "Come, mother, there is a coach at the door, and until Monday, at all events, we will return to our old quarters."

"— Where everything is ready, and a hearty welcome into the bargain," added Miss La Creevy. "Now, let me go with you downstairs."

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But Mrs. Nickleby was not to be so easily moved, for first she insisted on going upstairs to see that nothing had been left, and then on going downstairs to see that everything had been taken away; and when she was getting into the coach she had a vision of a forgotten coffee-pot on the back-kitchen hob, and after she was shut in, a dismal recollection of a green umbrella behind some unknown door. At last Nicholas, in a condition of absolute despair, ordered the coachman to drive away, and in the unexpected jerk of a sudden starting, Mrs. Nickleby lost a shilling among the straw, which fortunately confined her attention to the coach until it was too late to remember anything else.

Having seen everything safely out, discharged the servant, and locked the door, Nicholas jumped into a cabriolet and drove to a by-place near Golden Square where he had appointed to meet Noggs; and so quickly had everything been done, that it was barely half-past nine when he reached the place of meeting.

"Here is the letter for Ralph," said Nicholas, "and here the key. When you come to me this evening, not a word of last night. Ill news travels fast, and they will know it soon enough. Have you heard if he was much hurt?"

Newman shook his head.

"I will ascertain that myself without loss of time," said Nicholas.

"You had better take some rest," returned Newman. "You are fevered and ill."

Nicholas waved his hand carelessly, and concealing the indisposition he really felt, now that the excitement which had sustained him was over, took

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a hurried farewell of Newman Noggs, and left him.

Newman was not three minutes' walk from Golden Square, but in the course of that three minutes he took the letter out of his hat, and put it in again twenty times at least. First, the front, then the back, then the sides, then the superscription, then the seal, were objects of Newman's admiration. Then he held it at arm's length as if to take in the whole at one delicious survey, and then he rubbed his hands in a perfect ecstasy with his commission.

He reached the office, hung his hat on its accustomed peg, laid the letter and key upon the desk, and waited impatiently until Ralph Nickleby should appear. After a few minutes, the well-known creaking of his boots was heard on the stairs, and then the bell rung.

"Has the post come in?"

"No."

"Any other letters?"

"One." Newman eyed him closely, and laid it on the desk.

"What's this?" asked Ralph, taking up the key.

"Left with the letter; — a boy brought them — quarter of an hour ago, or less."

Ralph glanced at the direction, opened the letter, and read as follows:

"You are known to me now. There are no reproaches I could heap upon your head which would carry with them one thousandth part of the grovelling shame that this assurance will awaken even in your breast.

"Your brother's widow and her orphan child

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spurn the shelter of your roof, and shun you with disgust and loathing. Your kindred renounce you, for they know no shame but the ties of blood which bind them in name with you.

"You are an old man, and I leave you to the grave. May every recollection of your life cling to your false heart, and cast their darkness on your deathbed."

Ralph Nickleby read this letter twice, and frowning heavily, fell into a fit of musing; the paper fluttered from his hand and dropped upon the floor, but he clasped his fingers, as if he held it still.

Suddenly, he started from his seat, and thrusting it all crumpled into his pocket, turned furiously to Newman Noggs, as though to ask him why he lingered. But Newman stood unmoved with his back towards him, following up, with the worn and blackened stump of an old pen, some figures in an Interest-table which was pasted against the wall, and apparently quite abstracted from every other object.

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CHAPTER XIII.

WHEREIN MR. RALPH NICKLEBY IS VISITED BY PERSONS WITH WHOM THE READER HAS BEEN ALREADY MADE ACQUAINTED.

"WHAT a demnition long time you have kept me ringing at this confounded old cracked tea-kettle of a bell, every tinkle of which is enough to throw a strong man into blue convulsions, upon my life and soul, oh demmit," — said Mr. Mantalini to Newman Noggs, scraping his boots, as he spoke, on Ralph Nickleby's scraper.

"I didn't hear the bell more than once," replied Newman.

"Then you are most immensely and outrigeously deaf," said Mr. Mantalini, "as deaf as a demnition post."

Mr. Mantalini had got by this time into the passage, and was making his way to the door of Ralph's office with very little ceremony, when Newman interposed his body; and hinting that Mr. Nickleby was unwilling to be disturbed, inquired whether the client's business was of a pressing nature.

"It is most demnebly particular," said Mr. Mantalini. "It is to melt some scraps of dirty paper into bright, shining, chinking, tinkling, demd mint sauce."

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Newman uttered a significant grunt, and taking Mr. Mantalini's proffered card, limped with it into his master's office. As he thrust his head in at the door, he saw that Ralph had resumed the thoughtful posture into which he had fallen after perusing his nephew's letter, and that he seemed to have been reading it again, as he once more held it open in his hand. The glance was but momentary, for Ralph, being disturbed, turned to demand the cause of the interruption.

As Newman stated it, the cause himself swaggered into the room, and grasping Ralph's horny hand with uncommon affection, vowed that he had never seen him looking so well in all his life.

"There is quite a bloom upon your demd countenance," said Mr. Mantalini, seating himself unbidden, and arranging his hair and whiskers. "You look quite juvenile and jolly, demmit!"

"We are alone," returned Ralph tartly. "What do you want with me?"

"Good!" cried Mr. Mantalini, displaying his teeth. "What did I want! Yes. Ha, ha! Very good. *What* did I want. Ha, ha. Oh, dem!"

"What *do* you want, man?" demanded Ralph sternly.

"Demnition discount," returned Mr. Mantalini with a grin, and shaking his head waggishly.

"Money is scarce," said Ralph.

"Demd scarce, or I shouldn't want it," interrupted Mr. Mantalini.

"The times are bad, and one scarcely knows whom to trust," continued Ralph. "I don't want to do business just now, in fact I would rather not; but as you are a friend — how many bills have you there?"

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"Two," returned Mr. Mantalini.

"What is the gross amount?"

"Demd trifling — five and seventy."

"And the dates?"

"Two months, and four."

"I'll do them for you — mind, for *you*; I wouldn't for many people — for five and twenty pounds," said Ralph deliberately.

"Oh, demmit!" cried Mr. Mantalini, whose face lengthened considerably at this handsome proposal.

"Why, that leaves you fifty," retorted Ralph. "What would you have? Let me see the names."

"You are so demd hard, Nickleby," remonstrated Mr. Mantalini.

"Let me see the names," replied Ralph, impatiently extending his hand for the bills. "Well! They are not sure, but they are safe enough. Do you consent to the terms, and will you take the money? I don't want you to do so. I would rather you didn't."

"Demmit, Nickleby, can't you —" began Mr. Mantalini.

"No," replied Ralph, interrupting him. "I can't. Will you take the money — down, mind; no delay, no going into the City and pretending to negotiate with some other party who has no existence, and never had. Is it a bargain, or is it not?"

Ralph pushed some papers from him as he spoke, and carelessly rattled his cash-box, as though by mere accident. The sound was too much for Mr. Mantalini. He closed the bargain directly it reached his ears, and Ralph told the money out upon the table.

He had scarcely done so, and Mr. Mantalini had

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not yet gathered it all up, when a ring was heard at the bell, and immediately afterwards Newman ushered in no less a person than Madame Mantalini, at sight of whom Mr. Mantalini evinced considerable discomposure, and swept the cash into his pocket with remarkable alacrity.

"Oh, you *are* here," said Madame Mantalini, tossing her head.

"Yes, my life and soul, I am," replied her husband, dropping on his knees, and pouncing with kitten-like playfulness upon a stray sovereign. "I am here, my soul's delight, upon Tom Tidler's ground, picking up the demnition gold and silver."

"I am ashamed of you," said Madame Mantalini with much indignation.

"Ashamed — of *me*, my joy? It knows it is talking demd charming sweetness, but naughty fibs," returned Mr. Mantalini. "It knows it is not ashamed of its own popolorum tibby."

Whatever were the circumstances which had led to such a result, it certainly appeared as though the popolorum tibby had rather miscalculated, for the nonce, the extent of his lady's affection. Madame Mantalini only looked scornful in reply; and, turning to Ralph, begged him to excuse her intrusion.

"Which is entirely attributable," said Madame, "to the gross misconduct and most improper behavior of Mr. Mantalini."

"Of me, my essential juice of pine-apple!"

"Of you," returned his wife. "But I will not allow it. I will not submit to be ruined by the extravagance and profligacy of any man. I call Mr. Nickleby to witness the course I intend to pursue with you."

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"Pray don't call me to witness anything, ma'am," said Ralph. "Settle it between yourselves, settle it between yourselves."

"No, but I must beg you as a favor," said Madame Mantalini, "to hear me give him notice of what it is my fixed intention to do — my fixed intention, sir," repeated Madame Mantalini, darting an angry look at her husband.

"Will she call me 'Sir'?" cried Mantalini. "Me, who dote upon her with the demdest ardor! She, who coils her fascinations round me like a pure angelic rattlesnake! It will be all up with my feelings; she will throw me into a demd state."

"Don't talk of feelings, sir," rejoined Madame Mantalini, seating herself, and turning her back upon him. "You don't consider mine."

"I do not consider yours, my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Mantalini.

"No," replied his wife.

And notwithstanding various blandishments on the part of Mr. Mantalini, Madame Mantalini still said no, and said it too with such determined and resolute ill-temper, that Mr. Mantalini was clearly taken aback.

"His extravagance, Mr. Nickleby," said Madame Mantalini, addressing herself to Ralph, who leaned against his easy-chair with his hands behind him, and regarded the amiable couple with a smile of the supremest and most unmitigated contempt, — "his extravagance is beyond all bounds."

"I should scarcely have supposed it," answered Ralph sarcastically.

"I assure you, Mr. Nickleby, however, that it is," returned Madame Mantalini. "It makes me mis-

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M.r & Mrs Mantalini in Ralph Nickleby's Office.

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erable! I am under constant apprehensions, and in constant difficulty. And even this," said Madame Mantalini, wiping her eyes, "is not the worst. He took some papers of value out of my desk this morning without asking my permission."

Mr. Mantalini groaned slightly, and buttoned his trousers pocket.

"I am obliged," continued Madame Mantalini, "since our late misfortunes, to pay Miss Knag a great deal of money for having her name in the business, and I really cannot afford to encourage him in all his wastefulness. As I have no doubt that he came straight here, Mr. Nickleby, to convert the papers I have spoken of, into money, and as you have assisted us very often before, and are very much connected with us in this kind of matters, I wish you to know the determination at which his conduct has compelled me to arrive."

Mr. Mantalini groaned once more from behind his wife's bonnet, and fitting a sovereign into one of his eyes, winked with the other at Ralph. Having achieved this performance with great dexterity, he whipped the coin into his pocket, and groaned again with increased penitence.

"I have made up my mind," said Madame Mantalini, as tokens of impatience manifested themselves in Ralph's countenance, "to allowance him."

"To do what, my joy?" inquired Mr. Mantalini, who did not seem to have caught the words.

"To put him," said Madame Mantalini, looking at Ralph, and prudently abstaining from the slightest glance at her husband, lest his many graces should induce her to falter in her resolution, "to put him upon a fixed allowance; and I say that if

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he has a hundred and twenty pounds a year for his clothes and pocket-money, he may consider himself a very fortunate man."

Mr. Mantalini waited, with much decorum, to hear the amount of the proposed stipend, but when it reached his ears, he cast his hat and cane upon the floor, and drawing out his pocket-handkerchief, gave vent to his feelings in a dismal moan.

"Demnition!" cried Mr. Mantalini, suddenly skipping out of his chair, and as suddenly skipping into it again, to the great discomposure of his lady's nerves. "But no. It is a demd horrid dream. It is not reality. No!"

Comforting himself with this assurance, Mr. Mantalini closed his eyes and waited patiently till such time as he should wake up.

"A very judicious arrangement," observed Ralph with a sneer, "if your husband will keep within it, ma'am — as no doubt he will."

"Demmit!" exclaimed Mr. Mantalini, opening his eyes at the sound of Ralph's voice, "it is a horrid reality. She is sitting there before me. There is the graceful outline of her form; it cannot be mistaken — there is nothing like it. The two countesses had no outlines at all, and the dowager's was a demd outline. Why is she so excruciatingly beautiful that I cannot be angry with her, even now?"

"You have brought it upon yourself, Alfred," returned Madame Mantalini — still reproachfully, but in a softened tone.

"I am a demd villain!" cried Mr. Mantalini, smiting himself on the head. "I will fill my pockets with change for a sovereign in halfpence and drown myself in the Thames; but I will not be angry with

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her, even then, for I will put a note in the two-penny post as I go along, to tell her where the body is. She will be a lovely widow. I shall be a body. Some handsome women will cry; she will laugh demnebly."

"Alfred, you cruel, cruel creature," said Madame Mantalini, sobbing at the dreadful picture.

"She calls me cruel — me — me — who for her sake will become a demd, damp, moist, unpleasant body!" exclaimed Mr. Mantalini.

"You know it almost breaks my heart, even to hear you talk of such a thing," replied Madame Mantalini.

"Can I live to be mistrusted?" cried her husband. "Have I cut my heart into a demd extraordinary number of little pieces, and given them all away, one after another, to the same little engrossing demnition captivater, and can I live to be suspected by her? Demmit, no, I can't."

"Ask Mr. Nickleby whether the sum I have mentioned is not a proper one," reasoned Madame Mantalini.

"I don't want any sum," replied her disconsolate husband; "I shall require no demd allowance. I will be a body."

On this repetition of Mr. Mantalini's fatal threat, Madame Mantalini wrung her hands, and implored the interference of Ralph Nickleby; and after a great quantity of tears and talking, and several attempts on the part of Mr. Mantalini to reach the door, preparatory to straightway committing violence upon himself, that gentleman was prevailed upon, with difficulty, to promise that he wouldn't be a body. This great point attained, Madame Mantalini

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argued the question of the allowance, and Mr. Mantalini did the same, taking occasion to show that he could live with uncommon satisfaction upon bread and water, and go clad in rags, but that he could not support existence with the additional burden of being mistrusted by the object of his most devoted and disinterested affection. This brought fresh tears into Madame Mantalini's eyes, which having just begun to open to some few of the demerits of Mr. Mantalini, were only open a very little way, and could be easily closed again. The result was, that without quite giving up the allowance question, Madame Mantalini postponed its further consideration; and Ralph saw, clearly enough, that Mr. Mantalini had gained a fresh lease of his easy life, and that, for some time longer at all events, his degradation and downfall were postponed.

"But it will come soon enough," thought Ralph; "all love — bah! that I should use the cant of boys and girls — is fleeting enough; though that which has its sole root in the admiration of a whiskered face like that of yonder baboon, perhaps lasts the longest, as it originates in the greater blindness and is fed by vanity. Meantime the fools bring grist to my mill, so let them live out their day, and the longer it is, the better."

These agreeable reflections occurred to Ralph Nickleby, as sundry small caresses and endearments, supposed to be unseen, were exchanged between the objects of his thoughts.

"If you have nothing more to say, my dear, to Mr. Nickleby," said Madame Mantalini, "we will take our leaves. I am sure we have detained him much too long already."

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Mr. Mantalini answered, in the first instance, by tapping Madame Mantalini several times on the nose, and then, by remarking in words that he had nothing more to say.

"Demmit! I have, though," he added almost immediately, drawing Ralph into a corner. "Here's an affair about your friend Sir Mulberry. Such a demd extraordinary out-of-the-way kind of thing as never was — eh?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ralph.

"Don't you know, demmit?" asked Mr. Mantalini.

"I see by the paper that he was thrown from his cabriolet last night, and severely injured, and that his life is in some danger," answered Ralph with great composure; "but I see nothing extraordinary in that — accidents are not miraculous events, when men live hard, and drive after dinner."

"Whew!" cried Mr. Mantalini in a long shrill whistle. "Then don't you know how it was?"

"Not unless it was as I have just supposed," replied Ralph, shrugging his shoulders carelessly, as if to give his questioner to understand that he had no curiosity upon the subject.

"Demmit, you amaze me," cried Mantalini.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders again, as if it were no great feat to amaze Mr. Mantalini, and cast a wistful glance at the face of Newman Noggs, which had several times appeared behind a couple of panes of glass in the room-door; it being a part of Newman's duty, when unimportant people called, to make various feints of supposing that the bell had rung for him to show them out: by way of a gentle hint to such visitors that it was time to go.

"Don't you know," said Mr. Mantalini, taking

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Ralph by the button, "that it wasn't an accident at all, but a demd, furious, manslaughtering attack made upon him by your nephew?"

"What!" snarled Ralph, clenching his fists and turning a livid white.

"Demmit, Nickleby, you're as great a tiger as he is," said Mantalini, alarmed at these demonstrations.

"Go on," cried Ralph. "Tell me what you mean. What is this story? Who told you? Speak," growled Ralph. "Do you hear me?"

"'Gad, Nickleby," said Mr. Mantalini, retreating towards his wife, "what a demneble fierce old evil genius you are! You're enough to frighten my life and soul out of her little delicious wits — flying all at once into such a blazing, ravaging, raging passion as never was, demmit!"

"Pshaw," rejoined Ralph, forcing a smile. "It is but manner."

"It is a demd uncomfortable, private-madhouse sort of a manner," said Mr. Mantalini, picking up his cane.

Ralph affected to smile, and once more inquired from whom Mr. Mantalini had derived his information.

"From Pyke; and a demd, fine, pleasant, gentlemanly dog it is," replied Mantalini. "Demnition pleasant, and a tip-top sawyer."

"And what said he?" asked Ralph, knitting his brows.

"That it happened this way — that your nephew met him at a coffee-house, fell upon him with the most demneble ferocity, followed him to his cab, swore he would ride home with him, if he rode upon the horse's back or hooked himself on to the horse's

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tail; smashed his countenance, which is a demd fine countenance in its natural state; frightened the horse, pitched out Sir Mulberry and himself, and —"

"And was killed?" interposed Ralph with gleaming eyes. "Was he? Is he dead?"

Mantalini shook his head.

"Ugh," said Ralph, turning away. "Then he has done nothing — stay," he added, looking round again. "He broke a leg or an arm, or put his shoulder out, or fractured his collar-bone, or ground a rib or two? His neck was saved for the halter, but he got some painful and slow-healing injury for his trouble — did he? You must have heard that, at least."

"No," rejoined Mantalini, shaking his head again. "Unless he was dashed into such little pieces that they blew away, he wasn't hurt, for he went off as quiet and comfortable as — as — as demnition," said Mr. Mantalini, rather at a loss for a simile.

"And what," said Ralph, hesitating a little, "what was the cause of quarrel?"

"You are the demdest, knowing hand," replied Mr. Mantalini, in an admiring tone, "the cunningest, rummest, superlativest old fox — oh, dem! — to pretend now not to know that it was the little bright-eyed niece — the softest, sweetest, prettiest — "

"Alfred!" interposed Madame Mantalini.

"She is always right," rejoined Mr. Mantalini soothingly, "and when she says it is time to go, it is time, and go she shall; and when she walks along the streets with her own tulip, the women shall say, with envy, she has got a demd fine husband: and the men shall say with rapture, he has got a demd

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fine wife; and they shall both be right and neither wrong, upon my life and soul — oh demmit!"

With which remarks, and many more, no less intellectual and to the purpose, Mr. Mantalini kissed the fingers of his gloves to Ralph Nickleby, and drawing his lady's arm through his, led her mincingly away.

"So, so," muttered Ralph, dropping into his chair; "this devil is loose again, and thwarting me, as he was born to do, at every turn. He told me once there should be a day of reckoning between us, sooner or later. I'll make him a true prophet, for it shall surely come."

"Are you at home?" asked Newman, suddenly popping in his head.

"No," replied Ralph, with equal abruptness.

Newman withdrew his head, but thrust it in again.

"You're quite sure you're not at home, are you?" said Newman.

"What does the idiot mean?" cried Ralph testily.

"He has been waiting nearly ever since they first came in, and may have heard your voice — that's all," said Newman, rubbing his hands.

"Who has?" demanded Ralph, wrought by the intelligence he had just heard, and his clerk's provoking coolness, to an intense pitch of irritation.

The necessity of a reply was superseded by the unlooked-for entrance of a third party — the individual in question — who, bringing his one eye (for he had but one) to bear on Ralph Nickleby, made a great many shambling bows, and sat himself down in an armchair, with his hands on his knees, and his short black trousers drawn up so high in the legs by the exertion of seating himself, that they

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scarcely reached below the tops of his Wellington boots.

"Why, this *is* a surprise!" said Ralph, bending his gaze upon the visitor, and half smiling as he scrutinized him attentively: "I should know your face, Mr. Squeers."

"Ah!" replied that worthy, "and you'd have know'd it better, sir, if it hadn't been for all that I've been a-going through. Just lift that little boy off the tall stool in the back-office, and tell him to come in here, will you, my man?" said Squeers, addressing himself to Newman. "Oh, he's lifted hisself off. My son, sir, little Wackford. What do you think of him, sir, for a specimen of the Dotheboys Hall feeding? ain't he fit to bust out of his clothes, and start the seams, and make the very buttons fly off with his fatness? Here's flesh!" cried Squeers, turning the boy about, and indenting the plumpest parts of his figure with divers pokes and punches, to the great discomposure of his son and heir. "Here's firmness, here's solidness! why, you can hardly get up enough of him between your finger and thumb to pinch him anywheres."

In however good condition Master Squeers might have been, he certainly did not present this remarkable compactness of person, for on his father's closing his finger and thumb in illustration of his remark, he uttered a sharp cry, and rubbed the place in the most natural manner possible.

"Well," remarked Squeers, a little disconcerted, "I had him there; but that's because we breakfasted early this morning, and he hasn't had his lunch yet. Why, you couldn't shut a bit of him in a door, when he's had his dinner. Look at them tears, sir," said

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Squeers, with a triumphant air, as Master Wackford wiped his eyes with the cuff of his jacket, "there's oiliness!"

"He looks well, indeed," returned Ralph, who, for some purposes of his own, seemed desirous to conciliate the schoolmaster. "But how is Mrs. Squeers, and how are you?"

"Mrs. Squeers, sir," replied the proprietor of Dotheboys, "is as she always is — a mother to them lads, and a blessing, and a comfort, and a joy to all them as knows her. One of our boys — gorging hisself with vittles, and then turning ill; that's their way — got a abscess on him last week. To see how she operated upon him with a penknife! Oh, Lor!" said Squeers, heaving a sigh, and nodding his head a great many times, "what a member of society that woman is!"

Mr. Squeers indulged in a retrospective look, for some quarter of a minute, as if this allusion to his lady's excellences had naturally led his mind to the peaceful village of Dotheboys near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire: and then looked at Ralph, as if waiting for him to say something.

"Have you quite recovered that scoundrel's attack?" asked Ralph.

"I've only just done it, if I've done it now," replied Squeers. "I was one blessed bruise, sir," said Squeers, touching first the roots of his hair, and then the toes of his boots, "from *here* to *there*. Vinegar and brown paper, vinegar and brown paper, from morning to night. I suppose there was a matter of half a ream of brown paper stuck upon me, from first to last. As I laid all of a heap in our kitchen, plastered all over, you might have thought

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I was a large brown-paper parcel, chockful of nothing but groans. Did I groan loud, Wackford, or did I groan soft?" asked Mr. Squeers, appealing to his son.

"Loud," replied Wackford.

"Was the boys sorry to see me in such a dreadful condition, Wackford, or was they glad?" asked Mr. Squeers, in a sentimental manner.

"Gl—"

"Eh?" cried Squeers, turning sharp round.

"Sorry," rejoined his son.

"Oh!" said Squeers, catching him a smart box on the ear. "Then take your hands out of your pockets, and don't stammer when you're asked a question. Hold your noise, sir, in a gentleman's office, or I'll run away from my family and never come back any more; and then what would become of all them precious and forlorn lads as would be let loose on the world, without their best friend at their elbers?"

"Were you obliged to have medical attendance?" inquired Ralph.

"Ay, was I," rejoined Squeers, "and a precious bill the medical attendant brought in too; but I paid it, though."

Ralph elevated his eyebrows in a manner which might be expressive of either sympathy or astonishment — just as the beholder was pleased to take it.

"Yes, I paid it, every farthing," replied Squeers, who seemed to know the man he had to deal with too well to suppose that any blinking of the question would induce him to subscribe towards the expenses; "I wasn't out of pocket by it after all, either."

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"No!" said Ralph.

"Not a halfpenny," replied Squeers. "The fact is, we have only one extra with our boys, and that is for doctors when required — and not then, unless we're sure of our customers. Do you see?"

"I understand," said Ralph.

"Very good," rejoined Squeers. "Then, after my bill was run up, we picked out five little boys (sons of small tradesmen, as was sure pay) that had never had the scarlet fever, and we sent one to a cottage where they'd got it, and he took it, and then we put the four others to sleep with him, and *they* took it, and then the doctor came and attended 'em once all round, and we divided my total among 'em, and added it on to their little bills, and the parents paid it. Ha! ha! ha!"

"And a good plan, too," said Ralph, eying the schoolmaster stealthily.

"I believe you," rejoined Squeers. "We always do it. Why, when Mrs. Squeers was brought to bed with little Wackford here, we ran the whooping-cough through half a dozen boys, and charged her expenses among 'em, monthly nurse included. Ha! ha! ha!"

Ralph never laughed, but on this occasion he produced the nearest approach to it that he could, and waiting until Mr. Squeers had enjoyed the professional joke to his heart's content, inquired what had brought him to town.

"Some bothering law business," replied Squeers, scratching his head, "connected with an action, for what they call neglect of a boy. I don't know what they would have. He had as good grazing, that boy had, as there is about us."

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Ralph looked as if he did not quite understand the observation.

"Grazing," said Squeers, raising his voice, under the impression that as Ralph failed to comprehend him, he must be deaf. "When a boy gets weak and ill, and don't relish his meals, we give him a change of diet — turn him out, for an hour or so every day, into a neighbor's turnip field, or sometimes, if it's a delicate case, a turnip field and a piece of carrots alternately, and let him eat as many as he likes. There ain't better land in the county than this perwerse lad grazed on, and yet he goes and catches cold and indigestion and what not, and then his friends brings a lawsuit against *me!* Now, you'd hardly suppose," added Squeers, moving in his chair with the impatience of an ill-used man, "that people's ingratitude would carry them quite as far as that; would you?"

"A hard case, indeed," observed Ralph.

"You don't say more than the truth when you say that," replied Squeers. "I don't suppose there's a man going, as possesses the fondness for youth that I do. There's youth to the amount of eight hundred pound a year at Dotheboys Hall at this present time. I'd take sixteen hundred pound worth if I could get 'em, and be as fond of every individual twenty pound among 'em as nothing should equal it!"

"Are you stopping at your old quarters?" asked Ralph.

"Yes, we are at the Saracen," replied Squeers, "and as it don't want very long to the end of the half-year, we shall continney to stop there till I've collected the money, and some new boys, too, I hope."

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I've brought little Wackford up, on purpose to show to parents and guardians. I shall put him in the advertisement, this time. Look at that boy — himself a pupil — why, he's a miracle of high feeding, that boy is!"

"I should like to have a word with you," said Ralph, who had both spoken and listened mechanically for some time, and seemed to have been thinking.

"As many words as you like, sir," rejoined Squeers. "Wackford, you go and play in the back-office, and don't move about too much or you'll get thin, and that won't do. You haven't got such a thing as twopence, Mr. Nickleby, have you?" said Squeers, rattling a bunch of keys in his coat pocket, and muttering something about its being all silver.

"I — think I have," said Ralph, very slowly, and producing, after much rummaging in an old drawer, a penny, a halfpenny, and two farthings.

"Thankee," said Squeers, bestowing it upon his son. "Here! You go and buy a tart — Mr. Nickleby's man will show you where — and mind you buy a rich one. Pastry," added Squeers, closing the door on Master Wackford, "makes his flesh shine a good deal, and parents thinks that a healthy sign."

With this explanation, and a peculiarly knowing look to eke it out, Mr. Squeers moved his chair so as to bring himself opposite to Ralph Nickleby at no great distance off; and having planted it to his entire satisfaction, sat down.

"Attend to me," said Ralph, bending forward a little.

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Squeers nodded.

"I am not to suppose," said Ralph, "that you are dolt enough to forgive or forget, very readily, the violence that was committed upon you, or the exposure which accompanied it?"

"Devil a bit," replied Squeers tartly.

"Or to lose an opportunity of repaying it with interest, if you could get one?"

"Show me one, and try," rejoined Squeers.

"Some such object it was that induced you to call on me?" said Ralph, raising his eyes to the schoolmaster's face.

"N—n—no, I don't know that," replied Squeers. "I thought that if it was in your power to make me, besides the trifle of money you sent, any compensation —"

"Ah!" cried Ralph, interrupting him. "You needn't go on."

After a long pause, during which Ralph appeared absorbed in contemplation, he again broke silence by asking, —

"Who is this boy that he took with him?"

Squeers stated his name.

"Was he young or old, healthy or sickly, tractable or rebellious? Speak out, man," retorted Ralph.

"Why, he wasn't young," answered Squeers; "that is, not young for a boy, you know."

"That is, he was not a boy at all, I suppose?" interrupted Ralph.

"Well," returned Squeers briskly, as if he felt relieved by the suggestion, "he might have been nigh twenty. He wouldn't seem so old, though, to them as didn't know him, for he was a little want-

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ing here," touching his forehead; "nobody at home, you know, if you knocked ever so often."

"And you *did* knock pretty often, I dare say?" muttered Ralph.

"Pretty well," returned Squeers with a grin.

"When you wrote to acknowledge the receipt of this trifle of money as you call it," said Ralph, "you told me his friends had deserted him long ago, and that you had not the faintest clew or trace to tell you who he was. Is that the truth?"

"It is, worse luck!" replied Squeers, becoming more and more easy and familiar in his manner, as Ralph pursued his inquiries with the less reserve. "It's fourteen years ago, by the entry in my book, since a strange man brought him to my place, one autumn night, and left him there; paying five pound five, for his first quarter in advance. He might have been five or six year old at that time — not more."

"What more do you know about him?" demanded Ralph.

"Devilish little, I'm sorry to say," replied Squeers. "The money was paid for some six or eight year, and then it stopped. He had given an address in London, had this chap; but when it came to the point, of course nobody knowed anything about him. So I kept the lad out of — out of —"

"Charity?" suggested Ralph dryly.

"Charity, to be sure," returned Squeers, rubbing his knees, "and when he begins to be useful in a certain sort of way, this young scoundrel of a Nickleby comes and carries him off. But the most vexatious and aggeravating part of the whole affair

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is," said Squeers, dropping his voice, and drawing his chair still closer to Ralph, "that some questions have been asked about him at last — not of me, but in a roundabout kind of way, of people in our village. So that just when I might have had all arrears paid up, perhaps, and perhaps — who knows? such things have happened in our business before — a present besides for putting him out to a farmer, or sending him to sea, so that he might never turn up to disgrace his parents, supposing him to be a natural boy, as many of our boys are — damme, if that villain of a Nickleby don't collar him in open day, and commit as good as highway robbery upon my pocket."

"We will both cry quits with him before long," said Ralph, laying his hand on the arm of the Yorkshire schoolmaster.

"Quits!" echoed Squeers. "Ah! and I should like to leave a small balance in his favor, to be settled when he can. I only wish Mrs. Squeers could catch hold of him. Bless her heart! She'd murder him, Mr. Nickleby — she would, as soon as eat her dinner."

"We will talk of this again," said Ralph. "I must have time to think of it. To wound him through his own affections and fancies — If I could strike him through this boy —"

"Strike him how you like, sir," interrupted Squeers, "only hit him hard enough, that's all — and with that, I'll say good-morning. Here! — just chuck that little boy's hat off that corner peg, and lift him off the stool, will you?"

Bawling these requests to Newman Noggs, Mr. Squeers betook himself to the little back-office, and

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fitted on his child's hat with parental anxiety, while Newman, with his pen behind his ear, sat, stiff and immovable, on his stool, regarding the father and son by turns with a broad stare.

"He's a fine boy, ain't he?" said Squeers, throwing his head a little on one side, and falling back to the desk, the better to estimate the proportions of little Wackford.

"Very," said Newman.

"Pretty well swelled out, ain't he?" pursued Squeers. "He has the fatness of twenty boys, he has."

"Ah!" replied Newman, suddenly thrusting his face into that of Squeers, "he has;—the fatness of twenty!—more! He's got it all. God help the others. Ha! ha! Oh, Lord!"

Having uttered these fragmentary observations, Newman dropped upon his desk and began to write with most marvellous rapidity.

"Why, what does the man mean?" cried Squeers, coloring. "Is he drunk?"

Newman made no reply.

"Is he mad?" said Squeers.

But, still Newman betrayed no consciousness of any presence save his own; so, Mr. Squeers comforted himself by saying that he was both drunk *and* mad; and, with this parting observation, he led his hopeful son away.

In exact proportion as Ralph Nickleby became conscious of a struggling and lingering regard for Kate, had his detestation of Nicholas augmented. It might be that to atone for the weakness of inclining to any one person, he held it necessary to hate some other more intensely than before; but such

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had been the course of his feelings. And now to be defied and spurned, to be held up to her in the worst and most repulsive colors, to know that she was taught to hate and despise him: to feel that there was infection in his touch, and taint in his companionship — to know all this, and to know that the mover of it all was that same boyish poor relation who had twitted him in their very first interview, and openly bearded and braved him since, wrought his quiet and stealthy malignity to such a pitch, that there was scarcely anything he would not have hazarded to gratify it, if he could have seen his way to some immediate retaliation.

But, fortunately for Nicholas, Ralph Nickleby did not; and although he cast about all that day, and kept a corner of his brain working on the one anxious subject through all the round of schemes and business that came with it, night found him, at last, still harping on the same theme, and still pursuing the same unprofitable reflections.

"When my brother was such as he," said Ralph, "the first comparisons were drawn between us — always in my disfavor. *He* was open, liberal, gallant, gay; *I* a crafty hunks of cold and stagnant blood, with no passion but love of saving, and no spirit beyond a thirst for gain. I recollected it well when I first saw this whipster; but I remember it better now."

He had been occupied in tearing Nicholas's letter into atoms; and as he spoke, he scattered it in a tiny shower about him.

"Recollections like these," pursued Ralph, with a bitter smile, "flock upon me — when I resign myself to them — in crowds, and from countless

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quarters. As a portion of the world affect to despise the power of money, I must try and show them what it is."

And being, by this time, in a pleasant frame of mind for slumber, Ralph Nickleby went to bed.

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CHAPTER XIV.

SMIKE BECOMES KNOWN TO MRS. NICKLEBY AND KATE. — NICHOLAS ALSO MEETS WITH NEW ACQUAINTANCES. — BRIGHTER DAYS SEEM TO DAWN UPON THE FAMILY.

HAVING established his mother and sister in the apartments of the kind-hearted miniature-painter, and ascertained that Sir Mulberry Hawk was in no danger of losing his life, Nicholas turned his thoughts to poor Smike, who, after breakfasting with Newman Noggs, had remained in a disconsolate state, at that worthy creature's lodgings, waiting, with much anxiety, for further intelligence of his protector.

"As he will be one of our own little household, wherever we live, or whatever fortune is in reserve for us," thought Nicholas, "I must present the poor fellow in due form. They will be kind to him for his own sake, and if not (on that account solely) to the full extent I could wish, they will stretch a point, I am sure, for mine."

Nicholas said "they," but his misgivings were confined to one person. He was sure of Kate, but he knew his mother's peculiarities, and was not quite so certain that Smike would find favor in the eyes of Mrs. Nickleby.

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"However," thought Nicholas as he departed on his benevolent errand, "she cannot fail to become attached to him, when she knows what a devoted creature he is, and as she must quickly make the discovery, his probation will be a short one."

"I was afraid," said Smike, overjoyed to see his friend again, "that you had fallen into some fresh trouble; the time seemed so long, at last, that I almost feared you were lost."

"Lost!" replied Nicholas gayly. "You will not be rid of me so easily, I promise you. I shall rise to the surface many thousand times yet, and the harder the thrust that pushes me down, the more quickly I shall rebound, Smike. But come; my errand here is to take you home."

"Home!" faltered Smike, drawing timidly back.

"Ay," rejoined Nicholas, taking his arm. "Why not?"

"I had such hopes once," said Smike; "day and night, day and night, for many years. I longed for home till I was weary, and pined away with grief, but now —"

"And what now?" asked Nicholas, looking kindly in his face. "What now, old friend?"

"I could not part from you to go to any home on earth," replied Smike, pressing his hand; "except one, except one. I shall never be an old man; and if your hand placed me in the grave, and I could think, before I died, that you would come and look upon it sometimes with one of your kind smiles, and in the summer weather, when everything was alive — not dead like me — I could go to that home almost without a tear."

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"Why do you talk thus, poor boy, if your life is a happy one with me?" said Nicholas.

"Because *I* should change; not those about me. And if they forgot me, *I* should never know it," replied Smike. "In the churchyard we are all alike, but here there are none like me. I am a poor creature, but I know that."

"You are a foolish, silly creature," said Nicholas cheerfully. "If that is what you mean, I grant you that. Why, here's a dismal face for ladies' company! — my pretty sister too, whom you have so often asked me about. Is this your Yorkshire gallantry? For shame! for shame!"

Smike brightened up and smiled.

"When I talk of home," pursued Nicholas, "I talk of mine — which is yours of course. If it were defined by any particular four walls and a roof, God knows I should be sufficiently puzzled to say whereabouts it lay; but that is not what I mean. When I speak of home, I speak of the place where — in default of a better — those I love are gathered together; and if that place were a gypsy's tent, or a barn, I should call it by the same good name notwithstanding. And now, for what is my present home, which, however alarming your expectations may be, will neither terrify you by its extent nor its magnificence."

So saying, Nicholas took his companion by the arm, and saying a great deal more to the same purpose, and pointing out various things to amuse and interest him as they went along, led the way to Miss La Creevy's house.

"And this, Kate," said Nicholas, entering the room where his sister sat alone, "is the faithful

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friend and affectionate fellow-traveller whom I prepared you to receive."

Poor Smike was bashful, and awkward, and frightened enough, at first, but Kate advanced towards him so kindly, and said, in such a sweet voice, how anxious she had been to see him after all her brother had told her, and how much she had to thank him for having comforted Nicholas so greatly in their very trying reverses, that he began to be very doubtful whether he should shed tears or not, and became still more flurried. However, he managed to say, in a broken voice, that Nicholas was his only friend, and that he would lay down his life to help him; and Kate, although she was so kind and considerate, seemed to be so wholly unconscious of his distress and embarrassment, that he recovered almost immediately and felt quite at home.

Then, Miss La Creevy came in; and to her Smike had to be presented also. And Miss La Creevy was very kind too, and wonderfully talkative:—not to Smike, for that would have made him uneasy at first, but to Nicholas and his sister. Then, after a time, she would speak to Smike himself now and then, asking him whether he was a judge of likenesses, and whether he thought that picture in the corner was like herself, and whether he didn't think it would have looked better if she had made herself ten years younger, and whether he didn't think, as a matter of general observation, that young ladies looked better not only in pictures, but out of them too, than old ones; with many more small jokes and facetious remarks, which were delivered with such good-humor and merriment, that Smike thought,

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within himself, she was the nicest lady he had ever seen; even nicer than Mrs. Grudden, of Mr. Vincent Crummles's theatre; and she was a nice lady too, and talked, perhaps more, but certainly louder, than Miss La Creevy.

At length the door opened again, and a lady in mourning came in; and Nicholas kissing the lady in mourning affectionately, and calling her his mother, led her towards the chair from which Smike had risen when she entered the room.

"You are always kind-hearted, and anxious to help the oppressed, my dear mother," said Nicholas, "so you will be favorably disposed towards him, I know."

"I am sure, my dear Nicholas," replied Mrs. Nickleby, looking very hard at her new friend, and bending to him with something more of majesty than the occasion seemed to require, — "I am sure any friend of yours has, as indeed he naturally ought to have, and must have, of course, you know — a great claim upon me, and of course, it is a very great pleasure to me to be introduced to anybody you take an interest in — there can be no doubt about that; none at all; not the least in the world," said Mrs. Nickleby. "At the same time I must say, Nicholas, my dear, as I used to say to your poor dear papa, when he *would* bring gentlemen home to dinner, and there was nothing in the house, that if he had come the day before yesterday — no, I don't mean the day before yesterday now; I should have said, perhaps, the year before last — we should have been better able to entertain him."

With which remarks, Mrs. Nickleby turned to her daughter, and inquired, in an audibla whis-

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per, whether the gentleman was going to stop all night.

"Because, if he is, Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, "I don't see that it's possible for him to sleep anywhere, and that's the truth."

Kate stepped gracefully forward, and without any show of annoyance or irritation, breathed a few words into her mother's ear.

"La, Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, shrinking back, "how you do tickle one! Of course, I understand *that*, my love, without your telling me; and I said the same to Nicholas, and I *am* very much pleased. You didn't tell me, Nicholas, my dear," added Mrs. Nickleby, turning round with an air of less reserve than she had before assumed, "what your friend's name is."

"His name, mother," replied Nicholas, "is Smike."

The effect of this communication was by no means anticipated; but the name was no sooner pronounced, than Mrs. Nickleby dropped upon a chair, and burst into a fit of crying.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed Nicholas, running to support her.

"It's so like Pyke," cried Mrs. Nickleby; "so exactly like Pyke. Oh! don't speak to me—I shall be better presently."

And after exhibiting every symptom of slow suffocation in all its stages, and drinking about a teaspoonful of water from a full tumbler, and spilling the remainder, Mrs. Nickleby *was* better, and remarked, with a feeble smile, that she was very foolish, she knew.

"It's a weakness in our family," said Mrs.

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Nickleby, "so, of course, I can't be blamed for it. Your grandmamma, Kate, was exactly the same — precisely. The least excitement, the slightest surprise, she fainted away directly. I have heard her say, often and often, that when she was a young lady, and before she was married, she was turning a corner into Oxford Street one day, when she ran against her own hairdresser, who, it seems, was escaping from a bear; — the mere suddenness of the encounter made her faint away directly. Wait, though," added Mrs. Nickleby, pausing to consider. "Let me be sure I'm right. Was it her hairdresser who had escaped from a bear, or was it a bear who had escaped from her hairdresser's? I declare I can't remember just now, but the hairdresser was a very handsome man, I know, and quite a gentleman in his manners; so that it has nothing to do with the point of the story."

Mrs. Nickleby having fallen imperceptibly into one of her retrospective moods, improved in temper from that moment, and glided, by an easy change of the conversation occasionally, into various other anecdotes, no less remarkable for their strict application to the subject in hand.

"Mr. Smike is from Yorkshire, Nicholas, my dear?" said Mrs. Nickleby, after dinner, and when she had been silent for some time.

"Certainly, mother," replied Nicholas. "I see you have not forgotten his melancholy history."

"Oh dear, no," cried Mrs. Nickleby. "Ah! melancholy, indeed. You don't happen, Mr. Smike, ever to have dined with the Grimbles of Grimble Hall, somewhere in the North Riding, do you?" said the good lady, addressing herself to him. "A very

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proud man, Sir Thomas Grimble, with six grown-up and most lovely daughters, and the finest park in the county."

"My dear mother," reasoned Nicholas, "do you suppose that the unfortunate outcast of a Yorkshire school was likely to receive many cards of invitation from the nobility and gentry in the neighborhood?"

"Really, my dear, I don't know why it should be so very extraordinary," said Mrs. Nickleby. "I know that when *I* was at school, I always went at least twice every half-year to the Hawkinses at Taunton Vale, and they are much richer than the Grimbles, and connected with them in marriage; so you see it's not so very unlikely, after all."

Having put down Nicholas in this triumphant manner, Mrs. Nickleby was suddenly seized with a forgetfulness of Smike's real name, and an irresistible tendency to call him Mr. Slammons; which circumstance she attributed to the remarkable similarity of the two names in point of sound, both beginning with an S, and moreover being spelt with an M. But whatever doubt there might be on this point, there was none as to his being a most excellent listener; which circumstance had considerable influence in placing them on the very best terms, and inducing Mrs. Nickleby to express the highest opinion of his general deportment and disposition.

Thus, the little circle remained, on the most amicable and agreeable footing, until the Monday morning, when Nicholas withdrew himself from it for a short time, seriously to reflect upon the state of his affairs, and to determine, if he could, upon some course of life, which would enable him to

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support those who were so entirely dependent upon his exertions.

Mr. Crummles occurred to him more than once; but although Kate was acquainted with the whole history of his connection with that gentleman, his mother was not; and he foresaw a thousand fretful objections, on her part, to his seeking a livelihood upon the stage. There were graver reasons, too, against his returning to that mode of life. Independently of those arising out of its spare and precarious earnings, and his own internal conviction that he could never hope to aspire to any great distinction, even as a provincial actor, how could he carry his sister from town to town, and place to place, and debar her from any other associates than those with whom he would be compelled, almost without distinction, to mingle? "It won't do," said Nicholas, shaking his head; "I must try something else."

It was much easier to make this resolution than to carry it into effect. With no greater experience of the world than he had acquired for himself in his short trials; with a sufficient share of headlong rashness and precipitation (qualities not altogether unnatural at his time of life); with a very slender stock of money, and a still more scanty stock of friends; what could he do? "Egad!" said Nicholas, "I'll try that Register Office again."

He smiled at himself as he walked away with a quick step; for, an instant before, he had been internally blaming his own precipitation. He did not laugh himself out of the intention, however, for on he went: picturing to himself, as he approached the place, all kinds of splendid possibil-

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ities, and impossibilities too, for that matter, and thinking himself, perhaps with good reason, very fortunate to be endowed with so buoyant and sanguine a temperament.

The office looked just the same as when he had left it last, and, indeed, with one or two exceptions, there seemed to be the very same placards in the window that he had seen before. There were the same unimpeachable masters and mistresses in want of virtuous servants, and the same virtuous servants in want of unimpeachable masters and mistresses, and the same magnificent estates for the investment of capital, and the same enormous quantities of capital to be invested in estates, and, in short, the same opportunities of all sorts for people who wanted to make their fortunes. And a most extraordinary proof it was of the national prosperity, that people had not been found to avail themselves of such advantages long ago.

As Nicholas stopped to look in at the window, an old gentleman happened to stop too; and Nicholas, carrying his eye along the window-panes from left to right in search of some capital-text placard which should be applicable to his own case, caught sight of this old gentleman's figure, and instinctively withdrew his eyes from the window, to observe the same more closely.

He was a sturdy old fellow in a broad-skirted blue coat, made pretty large, to fit easily, and with no particular waist; his bulky legs clothed in drab breeches and high gaiters, and his head protected by a low-crowned, broad-brimmed white hat, such as a wealthy grazier might wear. He wore his coat buttoned; and his dimpled double chin rested in

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the folds of a white neckerchief — not one of your stiff-starched apoplectic cravats, but a good, easy, old-fashioned white neckcloth that a man might go to bed in and be none the worse for. But what principally attracted the attention of Nicholas was the old gentleman's eye, — never was such a clear, twinkling, honest, merry, happy eye, as that. And there he stood, looking a little upward, with one hand thrust into the breast of his coat, and the other playing with his old-fashioned gold watch-chain: his head thrown a little on one side, and his hat a little more on one side than his head (but that was evidently accident; not his ordinary way of wearing it), with such a pleasant smile playing about his mouth, and such a comical expression of mingled slyness, simplicity, kind-heartedness, and good-humor, lighting up his jolly old face, that Nicholas would have been content to have stood there and looked at him until evening, and to have forgotten, meanwhile, that there was such a thing as a soured mind or a crabbed countenance to be met with in the whole wide world.

But, even a very remote approach to this gratification was not to be made, for although he seemed quite unconscious of having been the subject of observation, he looked casually at Nicholas; and the latter, fearful of giving offence, resumed his scrutiny of the window instantly.

Still, the old gentleman stood there, glancing from placard to placard, and Nicholas could not forbear raising his eyes to his face again. Grafted upon the quaintness and oddity of his appearance, was something so indescribably engaging, and bespeaking so much worth, and there were so many

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little lights hovering about the corners of his mouth and eyes, that it was not a mere amusement, but a positive pleasure and delight to look at him. This being the case, it is no wonder that the old man caught Nicholas in the fact, more than once. At such times, Nicholas colored and looked embarrassed: for the truth is, that he had begun to wonder whether the stranger could, by any possibility, be looking for a clerk or secretary; and thinking this, he felt as if the old gentleman must know it.

Long as all this takes to tell, it was not more than a couple of minutes in passing. As the stranger was moving away, Nicholas caught his eye again, and, in the awkwardness of the moment, stammered out an apology.

"No offence — oh, no offence!" said the old man.

This was said in such a hearty tone, and the voice was so exactly what it should have been from such a speaker, and there was such a cordiality in the manner, that Nicholas was emboldened to speak again.

"A great many opportunities here, sir," he said, half smiling as he motioned towards the window.

"A great many people willing and anxious to be employed have seriously thought so very often, I dare say," replied the old man. "Poor fellows, poor fellows!"

He moved away as he said this; but seeing that Nicholas was about to speak, good-naturedly slackened his pace, as if he were unwilling to cut him short. After a little of that hesitation which may be sometimes observed between two people in the street who have exchanged a nod, and are both uncertain whether they shall turn back and

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speak, or not, Nicholas found himself at the old man's side.

"You were about to speak, young gentleman; what were you going to say?"

"Merely that I almost hoped — I mean to say, thought — you had some object in consulting those advertisements," said Nicholas.

"Ay, ay? what object now — what object?" returned the old man, looking slyly at Nicholas. "Did you think I wanted a situation now — eh? Did you think I did?"

Nicholas shook his head.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the old gentleman, rubbing his hands and wrists as if he were washing them. "A very natural thought, at all events, after seeing me gazing at those bills. I thought the same of you, at first; upon my word I did."

"If you had thought so at last, too, sir, you would not have been far from the truth," rejoined Nicholas.

"Eh?" cried the old man, surveying him from head to foot. "What! Dear me! No, no. Well-behaved young gentleman reduced to such a necessity! No no, no no."

Nicholas bowed, and bidding him good-morning, turned upon his heel.

"Stay," said the old man, beckoning him into a by-street, where they could converse with less interruption. "What d'ye mean, eh?"

"Merely that your kind face and manner — both so unlike any I have ever seen — tempted me into an avowal, which, to any other stranger in this wilderness of London, I should not have dreamed of making," returned Nicholas.

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"Wilderness! Yes, it is, it is. Good! It *is* a wilderness," said the old man with much animation. "It was a wilderness to me once. I came here barefoot — I have never forgotten it. Thank God!" and he raised his hat from his head, and looked very grave.

"What's the matter — what is it — how did it all come about?" said the old man, laying his hand on the shoulder of Nicholas, and walking him up the street. "You're — Eh?" laying his finger on the sleeve of his black coat. "Who's it for — eh?"

"My father," replied Nicholas.

"Ah!" said the old gentleman quickly. "Bad thing for a young man to lose his father. Widowed mother, perhaps?"

Nicholas sighed.

"Brothers and sisters too — eh?"

"One sister," rejoined Nicholas.

"Poor thing, poor thing! You are a scholar too, I dare say?" said the old man, looking wistfully into the face of the young one.

"I have been tolerably well educated," said Nicholas.

"Fine thing," said the old gentleman, "education a great thing — a very great thing — I never had any. I admire it the more in others. A very fine thing — yes, yes. Tell me more of your history. Let me hear it all. No impertinent curiosity — no, no, no."

There was something so earnest and guileless in the way in which all this was said, and such a complete disregard of all conventional restraints and coldnesses, that Nicholas could not resist it. Among men who have any sound and sterling qualities,

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there is nothing so contagious as pure openness of heart. Nicholas took the infection instantly, and ran over the main points of his little history without reserve: merely suppressing names, and touching as lightly as possible upon his uncle's treatment of Kate. The old man listened with great attention, and when he had concluded, drew his arm eagerly through his own.

"Don't say ano her word — not another word," said he. "Come along with me. We mustn't lose a minute."

So saying, the old gentleman dragged him back into Oxford Street, and hailing an omnibus on its way to the City, pushed Nicholas in before him, and followed himself.

As he appeared in a most extraordinary condition of restless excitement, and whenever Nicholas offered to speak, immediately interposed with — "Don't say another word, my dear sir, on any account — not another word," the young man thought it better to attempt no further interruption. Into the City they journeyed accordingly, without interchanging any conversation; and the farther they went, the more Nicholas wondered what the end of the adventure could possibly be.

The old gentleman got out, with great alacrity, when they reached the Bank, and once more taking Nicholas by the arm, hurried him along Threadneedle Street, and through some lanes and passages on the right, until they, at length, emerged in a quiet shady little square. Into the oldest and cleanest-looking house of business in the square, he led the way. The only inscription on the door-post was "Cheeryble, Brothers;" but from a hasty

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glance at the directions of some packages which were lying about, Nicholas supposed that the brothers Cheeryble were German merchants.

Passing through a warehouse which presented every indication of a thriving business, Mr. Cheeryble (for such Nicholas supposed him to be, from the respect which had been shown him by the warehousemen and porters whom they passed) led him into a little partitioned-off counting-house like a large glass case, in which counting-house there sat — as free from dust and blemish as if he had been fixed into the glass case before the top was put on, and had never come out since — a fat, elderly, large-faced clerk, with silver spectacles and a powdered head.

"Is my brother in his room, Tim?" said Mr. Cheeryble, with no less kindness of manner than he had shown to Nicholas.

"Yes, he is, sir," replied the fat clerk, turning his spectacle-glasses towards his principal, and his eyes towards Nicholas, "but Mr. Trimmers is with him."

"Ay! And what has he come about, Tim?" said Mr. Cheeryble.

"He is getting up a subscription for the widow and family of a man who was killed in the East India Docks this morning, sir," rejoined Tim. "Smashed, sir, by a cask of sugar."

"He is a good creature," said Mr. Cheeryble, with great earnestness. "He is a kind soul. I am very much obliged to Trimmers. Trimmers is one of the best friends we have. He makes a thousand cases known to us that we should never discover of ourselves. I am *very* much obliged to Trimmers."

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Saying which, Mr. Cheeryble rubbed his hands with infinite delight, and Mr. Trimmers happening to pass the door that instant, on his way out, shot out after him and caught him by the hand.

"I owe you a thousand thanks, Trimmers — ten thousand thanks — I take it very friendly of you — very friendly indeed," said Mr. Cheeryble, dragging him into a corner to get out of hearing. "How many children are there, and what has my brother Ned given, Trimmers?"

"There are six children," replied the gentleman, "and your brother has given us twenty pounds."

"My brother Ned is a good fellow, and you're a good fellow too, Trimmers," said the old man, shaking him by both hands with trembling eagerness. "Put me down for another twenty — or — stop a minute, stop a minute. We mustn't look ostentatious; put me down ten pound, and Tim Linkinwater ten pound. A check for twenty pound for Mr. Trimmers, Tim. God bless you, Trimmers — and come and dine with us some day this week; you'll always find a knife and fork, and we shall be delighted. Now, my dear sir — check from Mr. Linkinwater, Tim. Smashed by a cask of sugar, and six poor children — oh, dear, dear, dear!"

Talking on in this strain, as fast as he could, to prevent any friendly remonstrances from the collector of the subscription on the large amount of his donation, Mr. Cheeryble led Nicholas, equally astonished and affected by what he had seen and heard in this short space, to the half-opened door of another room.

"Brother Ned," said Mr. Cheeryble, tapping with his knuckles, and stooping to listen, "are you busy,

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my dear brother, or can you spare time for a word or two with me?"

"Brother Charles, my dear fellow," replied a voice from the inside, so like in its tones to that which had just spoken, that Nicholas started, and almost thought it was the same, "don't ask me such a question, but come in directly."

They went in, without further parley. What was the amazement of Nicholas when his conductor advanced, and exchanged a warm greeting with another old gentleman, the very type and model of himself — the same face, the same figure, the same coat, waistcoat, and neckcloth, the same breeches and gaiters — nay, there was the very same white hat hanging against the wall!

As they shook each other by the hand: the face of each lighted up by beaming looks of affection, which would have been most delightful to behold in infants, and which, in men so old, was inexpressibly touching: Nicholas could observe that the last old gentleman was something stouter than his brother; this, and a slight additional shade of clumsiness in his gait and stature, formed the only perceptible difference between them. Nobody could have doubted their being twin brothers.

"Brother Ned," said Nicholas's friend, closing the room-door, "here is a young friend of mine whom we must assist. We must make proper inquiries into his statements, in justice to him as well as to ourselves, and if they are confirmed — as I feel assured they will be — we must assist him, we must assist him, brother Ned."

"It is enough, my dear brother, that you say we should," returned the other. "When you say that,

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no further inquiries are needed. He *shall* be assisted. What are his necessities, and what does he require? Where is Tim Linkinwater? Let us have him here."

Both the brothers, it may be here remarked, had a very emphatic and earnest delivery; both had lost nearly the same teeth, which imparted the same peculiarity to their speech; and both spoke as if, besides possessing the utmost serenity of mind that the kindliest and most unsuspecting nature could bestow, they had, in collecting the plums from Fortune's choicest pudding, retained a few for present use, and kept them in their mouths.

"Where is Tim Linkinwater?" said brother Ned.

"Stop, stop, stop!" said brother Charles, taking the other aside. "I've a plan, my dear brother, I've a plan. Tim is getting old, and Tim has been a faithful servant, brother Ned; and I don't think pensioning Tim's mother and sister, and buying a little tomb for the family when his poor brother died, was a sufficient recompense for his faithful services."

"No, no, no," replied the other. "Certainly not. Not half enough, not half."

"If we could lighten Tim's duties," said the old gentleman, "and prevail upon him to go into the country, now and then, and sleep in the fresh air, besides, two or three times a week (which he could, if he began business an hour later in the morning), old Tim Linkinwater would grow young again in time; and he's three good years our senior now. Old Tim Linkinwater young again! Eh, brother Ned, eh? Why, I recollect old Tim Linkinwater quite a little boy, don't you? Ha, ha, ha! Poor Tim, poor Tim!"

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And the fine old fellows laughed pleasantly together: each with a tear of regard for old Tim Linkinwater standing in his eye.

"But hear this first — hear this first, brother Ned," said the old man hastily, placing two chairs, one on each side of Nicholas. "I'll tell it you myself, brother Ned, because the young gentleman is modest, and is a scholar, Ned, and I shouldn't feel it right that he should tell us his story over and over again as if he was a beggar, or as if we doubted him. No, no, no."

"No, no, no," returned the other, nodding his head gravely. "Very right, my dear brother, very right."

"He will tell me I'm wrong, if I make a mistake," said Nicholas's friend. "But whether I do or not, you'll be very much affected, brother Ned, remembering the time when we were two friendless lads, and earned our first shilling in this great city."

The twins pressed each other's hands in silence; and in his own homely manner, brother Charles related the particulars he had heard from Nicholas. The conversation which ensued was a long one, and when it was over, a secret conference of almost equal duration took place between brother Ned and Tim Linkinwater in another room. It is no disparagement to Nicholas to say, that before he had been closeted with the two brothers ten minutes, he could only wave his hand at every fresh expression of kindness and sympathy, and sob like a little child.

At length brother Ned and Tim Linkinwater came back together, when Tim instantly walked up to Nicholas and whispered in his ear in a very brief sentence (for Tim was ordinarily a man of few words),

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that he had taken down the address in the Strand, and would call upon him that evening, at eight. Having done which, Tim wiped his spectacles and put them on, preparatory to hearing what more the brothers Cheeryble had got to say.

"Tim," said brother Charles, "you understand that we have an intention of taking this young gentleman into the counting-house?"

Brother Ned remarked that Tim was aware of that intention, and quite approved of it; and Tim having nodded, and said he did, drew himself up and looked particularly fat, and very important. After which, there was a profound silence.

"I'm not coming an hour later in the morning, you know," said Tim, breaking out all at once, and looking very resolute. "I'm not going to sleep in the fresh air — no, nor I'm not going into the country, either. A pretty thing at this time of day, certainly. Pho!"

"Damn your obstinacy, Tim Linkinwater," said brother Charles, looking at him without the faintest spark of anger, and with a countenance radiant with attachment to the old clerk. "Damn your obstinacy, Tim Linkinwater, what do you mean, sir?"

"It's forty-four year," said Tim, making a calculation in the air with his pen, and drawing an imaginary line before he cast it up, "forty-four year, next May, since I first kept the books of Cheeryble, Brothers. I've opened the safe every morning all that time (Sundays excepted) as the clock struck nine, and gone over the house every night at half-past ten (except on Foreign Post nights, and then twenty minutes before twelve) to see the doors fastened, and the fires out. I've

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never slept out of the back-attic one single night. There's the same mignonette box in the middle of the window, and the same four flower-pots, two on each side, that I brought with me when I first came. There ain't — I've said it again and again, and I'll maintain it — there ain't such a square as this in the world. I *know* there ain't," said Tim, with sudden energy, and looking sternly about him. "Not one. For business or pleasure, in summer-time or winter — I don't care which — there's nothing like it. There's not such a spring in England as the pump under the archway. There's not such a view in England as the view out of my window; I've seen it every morning before I shaved, and I ought to know something about it. I have slept in that room," added Tim, sinking his voice a little, "for four and forty year; and if it wasn't inconvenient, and didn't interfere with business, I should request leave to die there."

"Damn you, Tim Linkinwater, how dare you talk about dying?" roared the twins by one impulse, and blowing their old noses violently.

"That's what I've got to say, Mr. Edwin and Mr. Charles," said Tim, squaring his shoulders again. "This isn't the first time you've talked about superannuating me; but, if you please, we'll make it the last, and drop the subject for evermore."

With these words, Tim Linkinwater stalked out, and shut himself up in his glass case, with the air of a man who had had his say, and was thoroughly resolved not to be put down.

The brothers interchanged looks, and coughed some half-dozen times without speaking.

"He must be done something with, brother Ned,"

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said the other warmly; "we must disregard his old scruples; they can't be tolerated, or borne. He must be made a partner, brother Ned; and if he won't submit to it peaceably, we must have recourse to violence."

"Quite right," replied brother Ned, nodding his head as a man thoroughly determined; "quite right, my dear brother. If he won't listen to reason, we must do it against his will, and show him that we are determined to exert our authority, We must quarrel with him, brother Charles."

"We must — we certainly must have a quarrel with Tim Linkinwater," said the other. "But in the meantime, my dear brother, we are keeping our young friend; and the poor lady and her daughter will be anxious for his return. So let us say good-by for the present, and — there, there — take care of that box, my dear sir — and — no, no, not a word now; but be careful of the crossings and —"

And with any disjointed and unconnected words which would prevent Nicholas from pouring forth his thanks, the brothers hurried him out: shaking hands with him all the way, and affecting very unsuccessfully — they were poor hands at deception! — to be wholly unconscious of the feelings that completely mastered him.

Nicholas's heart was too full to allow of his turning into the street until he had recovered some composure. When he at last glided out of the dark doorway corner in which he had been compelled to halt, he caught a glimpse of the twins stealthily peeping in at one corner of the glass case, evidently undecided whether they should follow up their late attack without delay, or for the present postpone

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laying further siege to the inflexible Tim Linkinwater.

To recount all the delight and wonder which the circumstances just detailed awakened at Miss La Creevy's, and all the things that were done, said, thought, expected, hoped, and prophesied in consequence, is beside the present course and purpose of these adventures. It is sufficient to state, in brief, that Mr. Timothy Linkinwater arrived, punctual to his appointment; that, oddity as he was, and jealous, as he was bound to be, of the proper exercise of his employers' most comprehensive liberality, he reported strongly and warmly in favor of Nicholas; and that, next day, he was appointed to the vacant stool in the counting-house of Cheeryble, Brothers, with a present salary of one hundred and twenty pounds a year.

"And I think, my dear brother," said Nicholas's first friend, "that if we were to let them that little cottage at Bow which is empty, at something under the usual rent, now — eh, brother Ned?"

"For nothing at all," said brother Ned. "We are rich, and should be ashamed to touch the rent under such circumstances as these. Where is Tim Linkinwater? — for nothing at all, my dear brother, for nothing at all."

"Perhaps it would be better to say something, brother Ned," suggested the other mildly; "it would help to preserve habits of frugality, you know, and remove any painful sense of overwhelming obligations. We might say fifteen pound, or twenty pound, and if it was punctually paid, make it up to them in some other way. And I might secretly advance a small loan towards a little furni-

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ture, and you might secretly advance another small loan, brother Ned; and if we find them doing well — as we shall; there's no fear, no fear — we can change the loans into gifts — carefully, brother Ned, and by degrees, and without pressing upon them too much; what do you say now, brother?"

Brother Ned gave his hand upon it, and not only said it should be done, but had it done too; and, in one short week, Nicholas took possession of the stool, and Mrs. Nickleby and Kate took possession of the house, and all was hope, bustle, and light-heartedness.

There surely never was such a week of discoveries and surprises as the first week of that cottage. Every night when Nicholas came home, something new had been found out. One day it was a grape-vine, and another day it was a boiler, and another day it was the key of the front-parlor closet at the bottom of the water-butt, and so on through a hundred items. Then, this room was embellished with a muslin curtain, and that room was rendered quite elegant by a window-blind, and such improvements were made, as no one would have supposed possible. Then there was Miss La Creevy, who had come out in the omnibus to stop a day or two and help, and who was perpetually losing a very small brown paper parcel of tin tacks and a very large hammer, and running about with her sleeves tucked up at the wrists, and falling off pairs of steps and hurting herself very much — and Mrs. Nickleby, who talked incessantly, and did something now and then, but not often — and Kate, who busied herself noiselessly everywhere, and was pleased with everything — and Smike, who made the garden a perfect

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wonder to look upon — and Nicholas, who helped and encouraged them every one — all the peace and cheerfulness of home restored, with such new zest imparted to every frugal pleasure, and such delight to every hour of meeting, as misfortune and separation alone could give!

In short, the poor Nicklebys were social and happy; while the rich Nickleby was alone and miserable.

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CHAPTER XV.

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL; RELATING TO FAMILY MATTERS. — SHOWING HOW MR. KENWIGS UNDERWENT VIOLENT AGITATION, AND HOW MRS. KENWIGS WAS AS WELL AS COULD BE EXPECTED.

It might have been seven o'clock in the evening, and it was growing dark in the narrow streets near Golden Square, when Mr. Kenwigs sent out for a pair of the cheapest white kid gloves — those at fourteen-pence — and selecting the strongest, which happened to be the right-hand one, walked downstairs with an air of pomp and much excitement, and proceeded to muffle the knob of the street-door knocker therein. Having executed this task with great nicety, Mr. Kenwigs pulled the door to, after him, and just stepped across the road to try the effect from the opposite side of the street. Satisfied that nothing could possibly look better in its way, Mr. Kenwigs then stepped back again, and calling through the keyhole to Morleena to open the door, vanished into the house, and was seen no longer.

Now, considered as an abstract circumstance, there was no more obvious cause or reason why Mr. Kenwigs should take the trouble of muffling this

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particular knocker, than there would have been for his muffling the knocker of any nobleman or gentleman resident ten miles off; because, for the greater convenience of the numerous lodgers, the street-door always stood wide open, and the knocker was never used at all. The first floor, the second floor, and the third floor, had each a bell of its own. As to the attics, no one ever called on them; if anybody wanted the parlors, they were close at hand, and all he had to do was to walk straight into them; while the kitchen had a separate entrance down the area steps. As a question of mere necessity and usefulness, therefore, this muffling of the knocker was thoroughly incomprehensible.

But knockers may be muffled for other purposes than those of mere utilitarianism, as, in the present instance, was clearly shown. There are certain polite forms and ceremonies which must be observed in civilized life, or mankind relapse into their original barbarism. No genteel lady was ever yet confined — indeed, no genteel confinement can possibly take place — without the accompanying symbol of a muffled knocker. Mrs. Kenwigs was a lady of some pretensions to gentility; Mrs. Kenwigs was confined. And, therefore, Mr. Kenwigs tied up the silent knocker on the premises in a white kid glove.

"I'm not quite certain neither," said Mr. Kenwigs, arranging his shirt-collar, and walking slowly upstairs, "whether, as it's a boy, I won't have it in the papers."

Pondering upon the advisability of this step, and the sensation it was likely to create in the neighborhood, Mr. Kenwigs betook himself to the sitting-

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room, where various extremely diminutive articles of clothing were airing on a horse before the fire, and Mr. Lumbey, the doctor, was dandling the baby — that is, the old baby — not the new one.

"It's a fine boy, Mr. Kenwigs," said Mr. Lumbey, the doctor.

"You consider him a fine boy, do you, sir?" returned Mr. Kenwigs.

"It's the finest boy I ever saw in all my life," said the doctor. "I never saw such a baby."

It is a pleasant thing to reflect upon, and furnishes a complete answer to those who contend for the gradual degeneration of the human species, that every baby born into the world is a finer one than the last.

"I ne—ver saw such a baby," said Mr. Lumbey, the doctor.

"Morleena was a fine baby," remarked Mr. Kenwigs; as if this were rather an attack, by implication, upon the family.

"They were all fine babies," said Mr. Lumbey. And Mr. Lumbey went on nursing the baby with a thoughtful look. Whether he was considering under what head he could best charge the nursing in the bill, was best known to himself.

During this short conversation, Miss Morleena, as the eldest of the family, and natural representative of her mother during her indisposition, had been hustling and slapping the three younger Miss Kenwigses, without intermission; which considerate and affectionate conduct brought tears into the eyes of Mr. Kenwigs, and caused him to declare that, in understanding and behavior, that child was a woman.

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"She will be a treasure to the man she marries, sir," said Mr. Kenwigs, half aside; "I think she'll marry above her station, Mr. Lumbey."

"I shouldn't wonder at all," replied the doctor.

"You never see her dance, sir, did you?" asked Mr. Kenwigs.

The doctor shook his head.

"Ay!" said Mr. Kenwigs, as though he pitied him from his heart, "then you don't know what she's capable of."

All this time there had been a great whisking in and out of the other room; the door had been opened and shut very softly about twenty times a minute (for it was necessary to keep Mrs. Kenwigs quiet); and the baby had been exhibited to a score or two of deputations from a select body of female friends, who had assembled in the passage, and about the street-door, to discuss the event in all its bearings. Indeed, the excitement extended itself over the whole street, and groups of ladies might be seen standing at the doors, — some in the interesting condition in which Mrs. Kenwigs had last appeared in public, — relating their experiences of similar occurrences. Some few acquired great credit from having prophesied, the day before yesterday, exactly when it would come to pass; others, again, related, how that they guessed what it was, directly they saw Mr. Kenwigs turn pale and run up the street as hard as ever he could go. Some said one thing, and some another; but all talked together, and all agreed upon two points: first, that it was very meritorious and highly praiseworthy in Mrs. Kenwigs to do as she had done: and secondly, that there never was such a skilful and scientific doctor as that Dr. Lumbey.

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In the midst of this general hubbub, Dr. Lumbey sat in the first-floor front, as before related, nursing the deposed baby, and talking to Mr. Kenwigs. He was a stout bluff-looking gentleman, with no shirt-collar to speak of, and a beard that had been growing since yesterday morning; for Dr. Lumbey was popular, and the neighborhood was prolific; and there had been no less than three other knockers muffled, one after the other, within the last forty-eight hours.

"Well, Mr. Kenwigs," said Dr. Lumbey, "this makes six. You'll have a fine family in time, sir."

"I think six is almost enough, sir," returned Mr. Kenwigs.

"Pooh! pooh!" said the doctor. "Nonsense! not half enough."

With this, the doctor laughed; but he didn't laugh half as much as a married friend of Mrs. Kenwigs's who had just come in from the sick-chamber to report progress, and take a small sip of brandy and water: and who seemed to consider it one of the best jokes ever launched upon society.

"They're not altogether dependent upon good-fortune, neither," said Mr. Kenwigs, taking his second daughter on his knee; "they have expectations."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Lumbey, the doctor.

"And very good ones too, I believe, haven't they?" asked the married lady.

"Why, ma'am," said Mr. Kenwigs, "it's not exactly for me to say what they may be, or what they may not be. It's not for me to boast of any family with which I have the honor to be connected; at the same time, Mrs. Kenwigs's is—

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I should say," said Mr. Kenwigs abruptly, and raising his voice as he spoke, "that my children might come into a matter of a hundred pound apiece, perhaps. Perhaps more, but certainly that."

"And a very pretty little fortune," said the married lady.

"There are some relations of Mrs. Kenwigs's," said Mr. Kenwigs, taking a pinch of snuff from the doctor's box, and then sneezing very hard, for he wasn't used to it, "that might leave their hundred pound apiece to ten people, and yet not go begging when they had done it."

"Ah! I know who you mean," observed the married lady, nodding her head.

"I made mention of no names, and I wish to make mention of no names," said Mr. Kenwigs, with a portentous look. "Many of my friends have met a relation of Mrs. Kenwigs's in this very room, as would do honor to any company; that's all."

"I've met him," said the married lady, with a glance towards Dr. Lumbey.

"It's naterally very gratifying to my feelings as a father, to see such a man as that, a-kissing and taking notice of my children," pursued Mr. Kenwigs. "It's naterally very gratifying to my feelings as a man, to know that man. It will be naterally very gratifying to my feelings as a husband, to make that man acquainted with this ewent."

Having delivered his sentiments in this form of words, Mr. Kenwigs arranged his second daughter's flaxen tail, and bade her be a good girl and mind what her sister, Morleena, said.

"That girl grows more like her mother every day," said Mr. Lumbey, suddenly stricken with an enthusiastic admiration of Morleena.

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"There!" rejoined the married lady. "What I always say — what I always did say! She's the very picter of her." Having thus directed the general attention to the young lady in question, the married lady embraced the opportunity of taking another sip of the brandy and water — and a pretty long sip too.

"Yes! there is a likeness," said Mr. Kenwigs, after some reflection. "But such a woman as Mrs. Kenwigs was, afore she was married! Good gracious, such a woman!"

Mr. Lumbey shook his head with great solemnity, as though to imply that he supposed she must have been rather a dazzler.

"Talk of fairies!" cried Mr. Kenwigs. "*I* never see anybody so light to be alive — never. Such manners too; so playful, and yet so sewerely proper! As for her figure! It isn't generally known," said Mr. Kenwigs, dropping his voice; "but her figure was such, at that time, that the sign of the Britannia, over in the Holloway Road, was painted from it!"

"But only see what it is now," urged the married lady. "Does *she* look like the mother of six?"

"Quite ridiculous," cried the doctor.

"She looks a deal more like her own daughter," said the married lady.

"So she does," assented Mr. Lumbey. "A great deal more."

Mr. Kenwigs was about to make some further observations, most probably in confirmation of this opinion, when another married lady, who had looked in to keep up Mrs. Kenwigs's spirits, and help to clear off anything in the eating and drinking way

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that might be going about, put in her head to announce that she had just been down to answer the bell, and there was a gentleman at the door who wanted to see Mr. Kenwigs "most particular."

Shadowy visions of his distinguished relation flitted through the brain of Mr. Kenwigs, as this message was delivered; and under their influence, he despatched Morleena to show the gentleman up straightway.

"Why, I do declare," said Mr. Kenwigs, standing opposite the door so as to get the earliest glimpse of the visitor, as he came upstairs, "it's Mr. Johnson! How do you find yourself, sir?"

Nicholas shook hands, kissed his old pupils all round, intrusted a large parcel of toys to the guardianship of Morleena, bowed to the doctor and the married ladies, and inquired after Mrs. Kenwigs in a tone of interest, which went to the very heart and soul of the nurse, who had come in to warm some mysterious compound, in a little saucepan over the fire.

"I ought to make a hundred apologies to you for calling at such a season," said Nicholas, "but I was not aware of it until I had rung the bell, and my time is so fully occupied now, that I feared it might be some days before I could possibly come again."

"No time like the present, sir," said Mr. Kenwigs. "The sitiwation of Mrs. Kenwigs, sir, is no obstacle to a little conversation between you and me, I hope?"

"You are very good," said Nicholas.

At this juncture, proclamation was made by another married lady, that the baby had begun to eat like anything; whereupon the two married ladies,

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already mentioned, rushed tumultuously into the bedroom to behold him in the act.

"The fact is," resumed Nicholas, "that before I left the country, where I have been for some time past, I undertook to deliver a message to you."

"Ay, ay?" said Mr. Kenwigs.

"And I have been," added Nicholas, "already in town for some days, without having had an opportunity of doing so."

"It's no matter, sir," said Mr. Kenwigs. "I dare say it's none the worse for keeping cold. Message from the country!" said Mr. Kenwigs, ruminating; "that's curious. I don't know anybody in the country."

"Miss Petowker," suggested Nicholas.

"Oh! from her, is it?" said Mr. Kenwigs. "Oh, dear, yes. Ah! Mrs. Kenwigs will be glad to hear from her. Henrietta Petowker, eh? How odd things come about, now! That you should have met her in the country! Well!"

Hearing this mention of their old friend's name, the four Miss Kenwigses gathered round Nicholas, open eyed and mouthed, to hear more. Mr. Kenwigs looked a little curious too, but quite comfortable and unsuspecting.

"The message relates to family matters," said Nicholas, hesitating.

"Oh, never mind," said Kenwigs, glancing at Mr. Lumbey, who, having rashly taken charge of little Lillyvick, found nobody disposed to relieve him of his precious burden. "All friends here."

Nicholas hemmed once or twice, and seemed to have some difficulty in proceeding.

"At Portsmouth, Henrietta Petowker is," observed Mr. Kenwigs.

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"Yes," said Nicholas, "Mr. Lillyvick is there."

Mr. Kenwigs turned pale, but he recovered, and said, *that* was an odd coincidence also.

"The message is from him," said Nicholas.

Mr. Kenwigs appeared to revive. He knew that his niece was in a delicate state, and had, no doubt, sent word that they were to forward full particulars. Yes. That was very kind of him — so like him too!

"He desired me to give his kindest love," said Nicholas.

"Very much obliged to him, I'm sure. Your great-uncle, Lillyvick, my dears!" interposed Mr. Kenwigs, condescendingly explaining it to the children.

"His kindest love," resumed Nicholas; "and to say that he had no time to write, but that he was married to Miss Petowker."

Mr. Kenwigs started from his seat with a petrified stare, caught his second daughter by her flaxen tail, and covered his face with his pocket-handkerchief. Morleena fell, all stiff and rigid, into the baby's chair, as she had seen her mother fall when she fainted away, and the two remaining little Kenwigses shrieked in affright.

"My children, my defrauded, swindled infants!" cried Mr. Kenwigs, pulling so hard, in his vehemence, at the flaxen tail of his second daughter, that he lifted her up on tiptoe, and kept her, for some seconds, in that attitude. "Villain, ass, traitor!"

"Drat the man!" cried the nurse, looking angrily around. "What does he mean by making that noise here?"

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Emotion of Mr. Kenwigs on hearing the family news from Nicholas.

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"Silence, woman!" said Mr. Kenwigs fiercely.

"I won't be silent," returned the nurse. "Be silent yourself, you wretch. Have you no regard for your baby?"

"No!" returned Mr. Kenwigs.

"More shame for you," retorted the nurse. "Ugh! you unnatural monster."

"Let him die," cried Mr. Kenwigs, in the torrent of his wrath. "Let him die! He has no expectations, no property to come into. We want no babies here," said Mr. Kenwigs recklessly. "Take 'em away, take 'em away to the Fondling!"

With these awful remarks, Mr. Kenwigs sat himself down in a chair, and defied the nurse, who made the best of her way into the adjoining room, and returned with a stream of matrons: declaring that Mr. Kenwigs had spoken blasphemy against his family, and must be raving mad.

Appearances were certainly not in Mr. Kenwigs's favor, for the exertion of speaking with so much vehemence, and yet in such a tone as should prevent his lamentations reaching the ears of Mrs. Kenwigs, had made him very black in the face; besides which, the excitement of the occasion, and an unwonted indulgence in various strong cordials to celebrate it, had swollen and dilated his features to a most unusual extent. But, Nicholas and the doctor — who had been passive at first, doubting very much whether Mr. Kenwigs could be in earnest — interfering to explain the immediate cause of his condition, the indignation of the matrons was changed to pity, and they implored him, with much feeling, to go quietly to bed.

"The attention," said Mr. Kenwigs, looking around

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with a plaintive air, "the attention that I've shown to that man! The hyseters he has eat, and the pints of ale he has drank, in this house — !"

"It's very trying, and very hard to bear, we know," said one of the married ladies; "but think of your dear darling wife."

"Oh, yes, and what she's been a-undergoing of, only this day," cried a great many voices. "There's a good man, do."

"The presents that have been made to him," said Mr. Kenwigs, reverting to his calamity, "the pipes, the snuff-boxes — a pair of india-rubber goloshes, that cost six and six—"

"Ah! it won't bear thinking of, indeed," cried the matrons generally; "but it'll all come home to him, never fear."

Mr. Kenwigs looked darkly upon the ladies, as if he would prefer its all coming home to *him*, as there was nothing to be got by it; but he said nothing, and resting his head upon his hand, subsided into a kind of doze.

Then, the matrons again expatiated on the expediency of taking the good gentleman to bed; observing that he would be better to-morrow, and that they knew what was the wear and tear of some men's minds when their wives were taken as Mrs. Kenwigs had been that day, and that it did him great credit, and there was nothing to be ashamed of in it; far from it; they liked to see it, they did, for it showed a good heart. And one lady observed, as a case bearing upon the present, that her husband was often quite light-headed from anxiety on similar occasions, and that once, when her little Johnny was born, it was nearly a week before he came to

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himself again, during the whole of which time he did nothing but cry "Is it a boy, is it a boy?" in a manner which went to the hearts of all his hearers.

At length, Morleena (who quite forgot she had fainted, when she found she was not noticed) announced that a chamber was ready for her afflicted parent; and Mr. Kenwigs, having partially smothered his four daughters in the closeness of his embrace, accepted the doctor's arm on one side, and the support of Nicholas on the other, and was conducted upstairs to a bedroom which had been secured for the occasion.

Having seen him sound asleep, and heard him snore most satisfactorily, and having further presided over the distribution of the toys, to the perfect contentment of all the little Kenwigses, Nicholas took his leave. The matrons dropped off one by one, with the exception of six or eight particular friends, who had determined to stop all night; the lights in the houses gradually disappeared; the last bulletin was issued that Mrs. Kenwigs was as well as could be expected; and the whole family were left to their repose.

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CHAPTER XVI.

NICHOLAS FINDS FURTHER FAVOR IN THE EYES OF THE BROTHERS CHEERYBLE AND MR. TIMOTHY LINKINWATER. — THE BROTHERS GIVE A BANQUET ON A GREAT ANNUAL OCCASION. — NICHOLAS, ON RETURNING HOME FROM IT, RECEIVES A MYSTERIOUS AND IMPORTANT DISCLOSURE FROM THE LIPS OF MRS. NICKLEBY.

THE Square in which the counting-house of the brothers Cheeryble was situated, although it might not wholly realize the very sanguine expectations which a stranger would be disposed to form on hearing the fervent encomiums bestowed upon it by Tim Linkinwater, was, nevertheless, a sufficiently desirable nook in the heart of a busy town like London, and one which occupied a high place in the affectionate remembrances of several grave persons domiciled in the neighborhood, whose recollections, however, dated from a much more recent period, and whose attachment to the spot was far less absorbing, than were the recollections and attachment of the enthusiastic Tim.

And let not those whose eyes have been accustomed to the aristocratic gravity of Grosvenor Square and Hanover Square, the dowager barrenness and

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frigidity of Fitzroy Square, or the gravel-walks and garden-seats of the Squares of Russell and Euston, suppose that the affections of Tim Linkinwater, or the inferior lovers of this particular locality, had been awakened and kept alive by any refreshing associations with leaves, however dingy, or grass, however bare and thin. The City square has no enclosure, save the lamp-post in the middle: and no grass, but the weeds which spring up round its base. It is a quiet, little-frequented, retired spot, favorable to melancholy and contemplation, and appointments of long-waiting; and up and down its every side the Appointed saunters idly by the hour together, wakening the echoes with the monotonous sound of his footsteps on the smooth worn stones, and counting, first the windows, and then the very bricks of the tall silent houses that hem him round about. In the winter-time, the snow will linger there, long after it has melted from the busy streets and highways. The summer's sun holds it in some respect, and while he darts his cheerful rays sparingly into the square, keeps his fiery heat and glare for noisier and less imposing precincts. It is so quiet that you can almost hear the ticking of your own watch when you stop to cool in its refreshing atmosphere. There is a distant hum — of coaches, not of insects — but no other sound disturbs the stillness of the square. The ticket porter leans idly against the post at the corner: comfortably warm, but not hot, although the day is broiling. His white apron flaps languidly in the air, his head gradually droops upon his breast, he takes very long winks with both eyes at once; even he is unable to withstand the soporific influence of the place, and

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is gradually falling asleep. But now, he starts into full wakefulness, recoils a step or two, and gazes out before him with eager wildness in his eye. Is it a job, or a boy at marbles? Does he see a ghost, or hear an organ? No; sight more unwonted still — there is a butterfly in the square — a real, live butterfly! astray from flowers and sweets, and fluttering among the iron heads of the dusty area railings.

But if there were not many matters immediately without the doors of Cheeryble Brothers, to engage the attention or distract the thoughts of the young clerk, there were not a few within to interest and amuse him. There was scarcely an object in the place, animate or inanimate, which did not partake in some degree of the scrupulous method and punctuality of Mr. Timothy Linkinwater. Punctual as the counting-house dial, which he maintained to be the best time-keeper in London next after the clock of some old, hidden, unknown church hard by (for Tim held the fabled goodness of that at the Horse Guards to be a pleasant fiction, invented by jealous West-enders), the old clerk performed the minutest actions of the day, and arranged the minutest articles in the little room, in a precise and regular order, which could not have been exceeded if it had actually been a real glass case, fitted with the choicest curiosities. Paper, pens, ink, ruler, sealing-wax, wafers, pounce-box, string-box, fire-box, Tim's hat, Tim's scrupulously folded gloves, Tim's other coat — looking precisely like a back view of himself as it hung against the wall — all had their accustomed inches of space. Except the clock, there was not such an accurate and unimpeachable instrument in existence as the little thermometer

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which hung behind the door. There was not a bird of such methodical and business-like habits in all the world, as the blind blackbird, who dreamed and dozed away his days in a large snug cage, and had lost his voice, from old age, years before Tim first bought him. There was not such an eventful story in the whole range of anecdote, as Tim could tell concerning the acquisition of that very bird; how, compassionating his starved and suffering condition, he had purchased him, with the view of humanely terminating his wretched life; how he determined to wait three days and see whether the bird revived; how, before half the time was out, the bird did revive; and how he went on reviving and picking up his appetite and good looks until he gradually became what — "what you see him now, sir," Tim would say, glancing proudly at the cage. And with that, Tim would utter a melodious chirrup, and cry, "Dick;" and Dick, who, for any sign of life he had previously given, might have been a wooden or stuffed representation of a blackbird indifferently executed, would come to the side of the cage in three small jumps, and, thrusting his bill between the bars, turn his sightless head towards his old master — and at that moment it would be very difficult to determine which of the two was the happier, the bird or Tim Linkinwater.

Nor was this all. Everything gave back, besides, some reflection of the kindly spirit of the brothers. The warehouse-men and porters were such sturdy, jolly fellows, that it was a treat to see them. Among the shipping announcements and steam-packet lists which decorated the counting-house wall, were designs for almshouses, statements of charities, and

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plans for new hospitals. A blunderbuss and two swords hung above the chimney-piece, for the terror of evil-doers, but the blunderbuss was rusty and shattered, and the swords were broken and edgeless. Elsewhere, their open display in such a condition would have raised a smile; but, there, it seemed as though even violent and offensive weapons partook of the reigning influence, and became emblems of mercy and forbearance.

Such thoughts as these occurred to Nicholas very strongly, on the morning when he first took possession of the vacant stool, and looked about him, more freely and at ease than he had before enjoyed an opportunity of doing. Perhaps they encouraged and stimulated him to exertion, for, during the next two weeks, all his spare hours, late at night and early in the morning, were incessantly devoted to acquiring the mysteries of book-keeping and some other forms of mercantile account. To these, he applied himself with such steadiness and perseverance that, although he brought no greater amount of previous knowledge to the subject than certain dim recollections of two or three very long sums entered into a ciphering-book at school, and relieved for parental inspection by the effigy of a fat swan tastefully flourished by the writing-master's own hand, he found himself at the end of a fortnight, in a condition to report his proficiency to Mr. Linkinwater, and to claim his promise that he, Nicholas Nickleby, should now be allowed to assist him in his graver labors.

It was a sight to behold Tim Linkinwater slowly bring out a massive ledger and day-book, and, after turning them over and over, and affectionately dust-

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ing their backs and sides, open the leaves here and there, and cast his eyes, half mournfully, half proudly, upon the fair and unblotted entries.

"Four and forty year, next May!" said Tim. "Many new ledgers since then. Four and forty year!"

Tim closed the book again.

"Come, come," said Nicholas, "I am all impatience to begin."

Tim Linkinwater shook his head with an air of mild reproof. Mr. Nickleby was not sufficiently impressed with the deep and awful nature of his undertaking. Suppose there should be any mistake — any scratching out!

Young men are adventurous. It is extraordinary what they will rush upon, sometimes. Without even taking the precaution of sitting himself down upon his stool, but standing leisurely at the desk, and with a smile upon his face — actually a smile; (there was no mistake about it; Mr. Linkinwater often mentioned it afterwards;) — Nicholas dipped his pen into the inkstand before him, and plunged into the books of Cheeryble Brothers!

Tim Linkinwater turned pale, and tilting up his stool on the two legs nearest Nicholas, looked over his shoulder in breathless anxiety. Brother Charles and brother Ned entered the counting-house together; but Tim Linkinwater, without looking round, impatiently waved his hand as a caution that profound silence must be observed, and followed the nib of the inexperienced pen with strained and eager eyes.

The brothers looked on with smiling faces, but Tim Linkinwater smiled not, nor moved for some

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minutes. At length, he drew a long slow breath, and still maintaining his position on the tilted stool, glanced at brother Charles, secretly pointed with the feather of his pen towards Nicholas, and nodded his head in a grave and resolute manner, plainly signifying "He'll do."

Brother Charles nodded again, and exchanged a laughing look with brother Ned; but, just then, Nicholas stopped to refer to some other page, and Tim Linkinwater, unable to contain his satisfaction any longer, descended from his stool, and caught him rapturously by the hand.

"He has done it!" said Tim, looking round at his employers and shaking his head triumphantly. "His capital B's and D's are exactly like mine; he dots all his small i's and crosses every t as he writes it. There ain't such a young man as this in all London," said Tim, clapping Nicholas on the back; "not one. Don't tell me! The City can't produce his equal. I challenge the City to do it!"

With this casting down of his gauntlet, Tim Linkinwater struck the desk such a blow with his clenched fist, that the old blackbird tumbled off his perch with the start it gave him, and actually uttered a feeble croak, in the extremity of his astonishment.

"Well said, Tim — well said, Tim Linkinwater!" cried brother Charles, scarcely less pleased than Tim himself, and clapping his hands gently as he spoke. "I knew our young friend would take great pains, and I was quite certain he would succeed, in no time. Didn't I say so, brother Ned?"

"You did, my dear brother — certainly, my dear brother, you said so, and you were quite right," re-

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Mr. Linkinwater intimates his approval of Nicholas.

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plied Ned. "Quite right. Tim Linkinwater is excited, but he is justly excited, properly excited. Tim is a fine fellow. Tim Linkinwater, sir — you're a fine fellow."

"Here's a pleasant thing to think of!" said Tim, wholly regardless of this address to himself, and raising his spectacles from the ledger to the brothers. "Here's a pleasant thing. Do you suppose I haven't often thought of what would become of these books when I was gone? Do you suppose I haven't often thought that things might go on irregular and untidy here, after I was taken away? But now," said Tim, extending his forefinger towards Nicholas, "now, when I've shown him a little more, I'm satisfied. The business will go on, when I'm dead, as well as it did when I was alive — just the same; and I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that there never were such books — never were such books! No, nor never will be such books — as the books of Cheeryble Brothers."

Having thus expressed his sentiments, Mr. Linkinwater gave vent to a short laugh indicative of defiance to the cities of London and Westminster, and, turning again to his desk, quietly carried seventy-six from the last column he had added up, and went on with his work.

"Tim Linkinwater, sir," said brother Charles; "give me your hand, sir. This is your birthday. How dare you talk about anything else till you have been wished many happy returns of the day, Tim Linkinwater? God bless you, Tim! God bless you!"

"My dear brother," said the other, seizing Tim's disengaged fist, "Tim Linkinwater looks ten years younger than he did on his last birthday."

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"Brother Ned, my dear boy," returned the other old fellow, "I believe that Tim Linkinwater was born a hundred and fifty years old, and is gradually coming down to five and twenty; for he's younger every birthday than he was the year before."

"So he is, brother Charles, so he is," replied brother Ned. "There's not a doubt about it."

"Remember, Tim," said brother Charles, "that we dine at half-past five to-day instead of two o'clock; we always depart from our usual custom on this anniversary, as you very well know, Tim Linkinwater. Mr. Nickleby, my dear sir, you will make one. Tim Linkinwater, give me your snuff-box as a remembrance to brother Charles and myself of an attached and faithful rascal, and take that, in exchange, as a feeble mark of our respect and esteem, and don't open it until you go to bed, and never say another word upon the subject, or I'll kill the blackbird. A dog! He should have had a golden cage half a dozen years ago, if it would have made him or his master a bit the happier. Now, brother Ned, my dear fellow, I'm ready. At half-past five, remember, Mr. Nickleby! Tim Linkinwater, sir, take care of Mr. Nickleby at half-past five. Now, brother Ned."

Chattering away thus, according to custom, to prevent the possibility of any thanks or acknowledgment being expressed on the other side, the twins trotted off, arm in arm; having endowed Tim Linkinwater with a costly gold snuff-box enclosing a bank note worth more than its value ten times told.

At a quarter past five o'clock, punctual to the minute, arrived, according to annual usage, Tim

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Linkinwater's sister; and a great to-do there was, between Tim Linkinwater's sister and the old housekeeper, respecting Tim Linkinwater's sister's cap, which had been despatched, per boy, from the house of the family where Tim Linkinwater's sister boarded, and had not yet come to hand: notwithstanding that it had been packed up in a bandbox, and the bandbox in a handkerchief, and the handkerchief tied on to the boy's arm; and notwithstanding, too, that the place of its consignment had been duly set forth, at full length, on the back of an old letter, and the boy enjoined, under pain of divers horrible penalties, the full extent of which the eye of man could not foresee, to deliver the same with all possible speed, and not to loiter by the way. Tim Linkinwater's sister lamented; the housekeeper condoled; and both kept thrusting their heads out of the second-floor window to see if the boy was "coming" — which would have been highly satisfactory, and, upon the whole, tantamount to his being come, as the distance to the corner was not quite five yards — when, all of a sudden, and when he was least expected, the messenger, carrying the bandbox with elaborate caution, appeared in an exactly opposite direction, puffing and panting for breath, and flushed with recent exercise; as well he might be; for he had taken the air, in the first instance, behind a hackney coach that went to Camberwell, and had followed two Punches afterwards, and had seen the Stilts home to their own door. The cap was all safe, however — that was one comfort — and it was no use scolding him — that was another; so the boy went upon his way rejoicing, and Tim Linkinwater's sister presented herself to

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the company below-stairs, just five minutes after the half-hour had struck by Tim Linkinwater's own infallible clock.

The company consisted of the brothers Cheeryble, Tim Linkinwater, a ruddy-faced, white-headed friend of Tim's (who was a superannuated bank clerk), and Nicholas, who was presented to Tim Linkinwater's sister with much gravity and solemnity. The party being now completed, brother Ned rang for dinner, and, dinner being shortly afterwards announced, led Tim Linkinwater's sister into the next room, where it was set forth with great preparation. Then, brother Ned took the head of the table, and brother Charles the foot; and Tim Linkinwater's sister sat on the left hand of brother Ned, and Tim Linkinwater himself on his right: and an ancient butler of apoplectic appearance, and with very short legs, took up his position at the back of brother Ned's armchair, and, waving his right arm preparatory to taking off the covers with a flourish, stood bolt-upright and motionless.

"For these and all other blessings, brother Charles," said Ned.

"Lord, make us truly thankful, brother Ned," said Charles.

Whereupon the apoplectic butler whisked off the top of the soup tureen, and shot, all at once, into a state of violent activity.

There was abundance of conversation, and little fear of its ever flagging, for the good-humor of the glorious old twins drew everybody out, and Tim Linkinwater's sister went off into a long and circumstantial account of Tim Linkinwater's infancy, immediately after the very first glass of champagne

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—taking care to premise that she was very much Tim's junior, and had only become acquainted with the facts from their being preserved and handed down in the family. This history concluded, brother Ned related how that, exactly thirty-five years ago, Tim Linkinwater was suspected to have received a love-letter, and how that vague information had been brought to the counting-house of his having been seen walking down Cheapside with an uncommonly handsome spinster: at which there was a roar of laughter, and Tim Linkinwater being charged with blushing, and called upon to explain, denied that the accusation was true; and further, that there would have been any harm in it if it had been; which last position occasioned the superannuated bank clerk to laugh tremendously, and to declare that it was the very best thing he had ever heard in his life, and that Tim Linkinwater might say a great many things before he said anything which would beat *that*.

There was one little ceremony peculiar to the day, both the matter and manner of which made a very strong impression upon Nicholas. The cloth having been removed and the decanters sent round for the first time, a profound silence succeeded, and in the cheerful faces of the brothers there appeared an expression, not of absolute melancholy, but of quiet thoughtfulness very unusual at a festive table. As Nicholas, struck by this sudden alteration, was wondering what it could portend, the brothers rose together, and the one at the top of the table leaning forward towards the other, and speaking in a low voice as if he were addressing him individually, said,—

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"Brother Charles, my dear fellow, there is another association connected with this day which must never be forgotten, and never can be forgotten, by you and me. This day, which brought into the world a most faithful and excellent and exemplary fellow, took from it the kindest and very best of parents — the very best of parents to us both. I wish that she could have seen us in our prosperity, and shared it, and had the happiness of knowing how dearly we loved her in it, as we did when we were two poor boys — but that was not to be. My dear brother — The Memory of our Mother."

"Good God!" thought Nicholas, "and there are scores of people of their own station, knowing all this, and twenty thousand times more, who wouldn't ask these men to dinner because they eat with their knives and never went to school!"

But there was no time to moralize, for the joviality again became very brisk, and the decanter of port being nearly out, brother Ned pulled the bell, which was instantly answered by the apoplectic butler.

"David," said brother Ned.

"Sir," replied the butler.

"A magnum of the double-diamond, David, to drink the health of Mr. Linkinwater."

Instantly, by a feat of dexterity, which was the admiration of all the company, and had been, annually, for some years past, the apoplectic butler, bringing his left hand from behind the small of his back, produced the bottle with the corkscrew already inserted; uncorked it at a jerk; and placed the magnum and the cork before his master with the dignity of conscious cleverness.

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"Ha!" said brother Ned, first examining the cork and afterwards filling his glass, while the old butler looked complacently and amiably on, as if it were all his own property, but the company were quite welcome to make free with it, "this looks well, David."

"It ought to, sir," replied David. "You'd be troubled to find such a glass of wine as is our double-diamond, and that Mr. Linkinwater knows very well. That was laid down when Mr. Linkinwater first come: that wine was, gentlemen."

"Nay, David, nay," interposed brother Charles.

"I wrote the entry in the cellar-book myself, sir, *if* you please," said David, in the tone of a man quite confident in the strength of his facts. "Mr. Linkinwater had only been here twenty year, sir, when that pipe of double-diamond was laid down."

"David is quite right—quite right, brother Charles," said Ned: "are the people here, David?"

"Outside the door, sir," replied the butler.

"Show 'em in, David, show 'em in."

At this bidding, the old butler placed before his master a small tray of clean glasses, and opening the door admitted the jolly porters and warehousemen whom Nicholas had seen below. They were four in all, and as they came in, bowing, and grinning, and blushing, the housekeeper, and cook, and housemaid, brought up the rear.

"Seven," said brother Ned, filling a corresponding number of glasses with the double-diamond, "and David, eight. There! Now, you're all of you to drink the health of your best friend, Mr. Timothy Linkinwater, and wish him health and long life and many happy returns of this day, both for his own

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sake and that of your old masters, who consider him an inestimable treasure. Tim Linkinwater, sir, your health. Devil take you, Tim Linkinwater, sir, God bless you."

With this singular contradiction of terms, brother Ned gave Tim Linkinwater a slap on the back, which made him look, for the moment, almost as apoplectic as the butler: and tossed off the contents of his glass in a twinkling.

The toast was scarcely drunk with all honor to Tim Linkinwater, when the sturdiest and jolliest subordinate elbowed himself a little in advance of his fellows, and exhibiting a very hot and flushed countenance, pulled a single lock of gray hair in the middle of his forehead as a respectful salute to the company, and delivered himself as follows — rubbing the palms of his hands very hard on a blue cotton handkerchief as he did so:

"We're allowed to take a liberty once a year, gen'lemen, and if you please we'll take it now; there being no time like the present, and no two birds in the hand worth one in the bush, as is well known — leastways in a contrairy sense, which the meaning is the same. (A pause — the butler unconvinced.) What we mean to say is, that there never was (looking at the butler) — such — (looking at the cook) noble — excellent — (looking everywhere and seeing nobody) free, generous-spirited masters as them as has treated us so handsome this day. And here's thanking of 'em for all their goodness as is so constancy a-diffusing of itself over everywhere, and wishing they may live long and die happy!"

When the foregoing speech was over — and it might have been much more elegant and much less

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to the purpose,—the whole body of subordinates under command of the apoplectic butler gave three soft cheers; which, to that gentleman's great indignation, were not very regular, inasmuch as the women persisted in giving an immense number of little shrill hurrahs among themselves, in utter disregard of the time. This done, they withdrew; shortly afterwards, Tim Linkinwater's sister withdrew; in reasonable time after that, the sitting was broken up for tea and coffee, and a round game of cards.

At half-past ten—late hours for the square—there appeared a little tray of sandwiches and a bowl of bishop, which bishop-coming on the top of the double-diamond, and other excitements, had such an effect upon Tim Linkinwater, that he drew Nicholas aside, and gave him to understand, confidentially, that it was quite true about the uncommonly handsome spinster, and that she was to the full as good-looking as she had been described—more so, indeed—but that she was in too much of a hurry to change her condition, and consequently, while Tim was courting her and thinking of changing his, got married to somebody else. "After all, I dare say it was my fault," said Tim. "I'll show you a print I have got upstairs, one of these days. It cost me five and twenty shillings. I bought it soon after we were cool to each other. Don't mention it, but it's the most extraordinary accidental likeness you ever saw—her very portrait, sir!"

By this time it was past eleven o'clock; and Tim Linkinwater's sister declaring that she ought to have been at home a full hour ago, a coach was procured, into which she was handed with great

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ceremony by brother Ned, while brother Charles imparted the fullest directions to the coachman, and besides paying the man a shilling over and above his fare, in order that he might take the utmost care of the lady, all but choked him with a glass of spirits of uncommon strength, and then nearly knocked all the breath out of his body in his energetic endeavors to knock it in again.

At length the coach rumbled off, and Tim Linkinwater's sister being now fairly on her way home, Nicholas and Tim Linkinwater's friend took their leaves together, and left old Tim and the worthy brothers to their repose.

As Nicholas had some distance to walk, it was considerably past midnight by the time he reached home, where he found his mother and Smike sitting up to receive him. It was long after their usual hour of retiring, and they had expected him, at the very latest, two hours ago; but the time had not hung heavily on their hands, for Mrs. Nickleby had entertained Smike with a genealogical account of her family by the mother's side, comprising biographical sketches of the principal members, and Smike had sat wondering what it was all about, and whether it was learned from a book, or said out of Mrs. Nickleby's own head; so that they got on together very pleasantly.

Nicholas could not go to bed without expatiating on the excellences and munificence of the brothers Cheeryble, and relating the great success which had attended his efforts that day. But before he had said a dozen words, Mrs. Nickleby, with many sly winks and nods, observed, that she was sure Mr. Smike must be quite tired out, and that she posi-

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tively must insist on his not sitting up a minute longer.

"A most biddable creature he is, to be sure," said Mrs. Nickleby, when Smike had wished them good-night, and left the room. "I know you'll excuse me, Nicholas, my dear, but I don't like to do this before a third person; indeed, before a young man it would not be quite proper, though really, after all, I don't know what harm there is in it, except that to be sure it's not a very becoming thing, though some people say it is very much so, and really I don't know why it should not be, if it's well got up, and the borders are small-plaited; of course, a good deal depends upon that."

With which preface, Mrs. Nickleby took her nightcap from between the leaves of a very large Prayer-book where it had been folded up small, and proceeded to tie it on: talking away, in her usual discursive manner, all the time.

"People may say what they like," observed Mrs. Nickleby, "but there's a great deal of comfort in a nightcap, as I'm sure you would confess, Nicholas, my dear, if you would only have strings to yours, and wear it like a Christian, instead of sticking it upon the very top of your head like a blue-coat boy. You needn't think it an unmanly or quizzical thing to be particular about your nightcap, for I have often heard your poor dear papa, and the Reverend Mr. What's-his-name, who used to read prayers in that old church with the curious little steeple that the weathercock was blown off the night week before you were born, — I have often heard them say, that the young men at college are uncommonly particular about their nightcaps, and that the

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Oxford nightcaps are quite celebrated for their strength and goodness; so much so, indeed, that the young men never dream of going to bed without 'em, and I believe it's admitted on all hands that *they* know what's good, and don't coddle themselves."

Nicholas laughed, and entering no further into the subject of this lengthened harangue, reverted to the pleasant tone of the little birthday party. And as Mrs. Nickleby instantly became very curious respecting it, and made a great number of inquiries touching what they had had for dinner, and how it was put on table, and whether it was overdone or underdone, and who was there, and what "the Mr. Cherrybles" said, and what Nicholas said, and what the Mr. Cherrybles said when he said that; Nicholas described the festivities at full length, and also the occurrences of the morning.

"Late as it is," said Nicholas, "I am almost selfish enough to wish that Kate had been up to hear all this. I was all impatience, as I came along, to tell her."

"Why, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby, putting her feet upon the fender, and drawing her chair close to it, as if settling herself for a long talk. "Kate has been in bed — oh! a couple of hours — and I'm very glad, Nicholas my dear, that I prevailed upon her not to sit up, for I wished very much to have an opportunity of saying a few words to you. I am naturally anxious about it, and of course it's a very delightful and consoling thing to have a grown-up son that one can put confidence in, and advise with — indeed I don't know any use there would be in having sons at all, unless people could put confidence in them."

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Nicholas stopped in the middle of a sleepy yawn, as his mother began to speak: and looked at her with fixed attention.

"There was a lady in our neighborhood," said Mrs. Nickleby, "speaking of sons puts me in mind of it — a lady in our neighborhood when we lived near Dawlish, I think her name was Rogers; indeed I am sure it was if it wasn't Murphy, which is the only doubt I have —"

"Is it about her, mother, that you wished to speak to me?" said Nicholas quietly.

"About *her!*" cried Mrs. Nickleby. "Good gracious, Nicholas, my dear, how *can* you be so ridiculous! But that was always the way with your poor dear papa, — just his way, always wandering, never able to fix his thoughts on any one subject for two minutes together. I think I see him now!" said Mrs. Nickleby, wiping her eyes, "looking at me while I was talking to him about his affairs, just as if his ideas were in a state of perfect conglomeration! Anybody who had come in upon us suddenly would have supposed I was confusing and distracting him instead of making things plainer; upon my word they would."

"I am very sorry, mother, that I should inherit this unfortunate slowness of apprehension," said Nicholas kindly; "but I'll do my best to understand you, if you'll only go straight on: indeed I will."

"Your poor pa!" said Mrs. Nickleby, pondering. "He never knew, till it was too late, what I would have had him do!"

This was undoubtedly the case, inasmuch as the deceased Mr. Nickleby had not arrived at the

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knowledge when he died. Neither had Mrs. Nickleby herself; which is, in some sort, an explanation of the circumstance.

"However," said Mrs. Nickleby, drying her tears, "this has nothing to do — certainly nothing whatever to do — with the gentleman in the next house."

"I should suppose that the gentleman in the next house has as little to do with us," returned Nicholas.

"There can be no doubt," said Mrs. Nickleby, "that he *is* a gentleman, and has the manners of a gentleman, and the appearance of a gentleman, although he does wear smalls and gray worsted stockings. That may be eccentricity, or he may be proud of his legs. I don't see why he shouldn't be. The Prince Regent was proud of his legs, and so was Daniel Lambert, who was also a fat man; *he* was proud of his legs. So was Miss Biffin: she was — no," added Mrs. Nickleby, correcting herself, "I think she had only toes, but the principle is the same."

Nicholas looked on, quite amazed at the introduction of this new theme. Which seemed just what Mrs. Nickleby had expected him to be.

"You may well be surprised, Nicholas, my dear," she said, "I am sure *I* was. It came upon me like a flash of fire, and almost froze my blood. The bottom of his garden joins the bottom of ours, and of course I had several times seen him sitting among the scarlet-beans in his little arbor, or working at his little hotbeds. I used to think he stared rather, but I didn't take any particular notice of that, as we were new-comers, and he might be curious to see what we were like. But when he began to throw his cucumbers over our wall —"

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"To throw his cucumbers over our wall!" repeated Nicholas in great astonishment.

"Yes, Nicholas, my dear," replied Mrs. Nickleby in a very serious tone; "his cucumbers over our wall. And vegetable marrows likewise."

"Confound his impudence!" said Nicholas, firing immediately. "What does he mean by that?"

"I don't think he means it impertinently at all," replied Mrs. Nickleby.

"What!" said Nicholas, "cucumbers and vegetable marrows flying at the heads of the family as they walk in their own garden, and not meant impertinently! Why, mother —"

Nicholas stopped short; for there was an indescribable expression of placid triumph, mingled with a modest confusion, lingering between the borders of Mrs. Nickleby's nightcap, which arrested his attention suddenly.

"He must be a very weak, and foolish, and inconsiderate man," said Mrs. Nickleby; "blamable indeed — at least I suppose other people would consider him so; of course I can't be expected to express any opinion on that point, especially after always defending your poor dear papa when other people blamed him for making proposals to me; and to be sure there can be no doubt that he has taken a very singular way of showing it. Still, at the same time, his attentions are — that is, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent of course — a flattering sort of thing; and although I should never dream of marrying again with a dear girl like Kate still unsettled in life —"

"Surely, mother, such an idea never entered your brain for an instant?" said Nicholas.

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"Bless my heart, Nicholas my dear," returned his mother in a peevish tone, "isn't that precisely what I am saying, if you would only let me speak? Of course, I never gave it a second thought, and I am surprised and astonished that you should suppose me capable of such a thing. All I say is, what step is the best to take, so as to reject these advances civilly and delicately, and without hurting his feelings too much, and driving him to despair, or anything of that kind? My goodness me!" exclaimed Mrs. Nickleby, with a half-simper, "suppose he was to go doing anything rash to himself. Could I ever be happy again, Nicholas?"

Despite his vexation and concern, Nicholas could scarcely help smiling, as he rejoined, "Now, do you think, mother, that such a result would be likely to ensue from the most cruel repulse?"

"Upon my word, my dear, I don't know," returned Mrs. Nickleby; "really, I don't know. I am sure there was a case in the day before yesterday's paper, extracted from one of the French newspapers, about a journeyman shoemaker who was jealous of a young girl in an adjoining village, because she wouldn't shut herself up in an air-tight three-pair-of-stairs, and charcoal herself to death with him; and who went and hid himself in a wood with a sharp-pointed knife, and rushed out, as she was passing by with a few friends, and killed himself first, and then all the friends, and then her — no, killed all the friends first, and then herself, and then *him*self — which it is quite frightful to think of. Somehow or other," added Mrs. Nickleby, after a momentary pause, "they always *are* journeyman shoemakers who do these things in France, accord-

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ing to the papers. I don't know how it is — something in the leather, I suppose."

"But this man, who is not a shoemaker — what has he done, mother, what has he said?" inquired Nicholas, fretted almost beyond endurance, but looking nearly as resigned and patient as Mrs. Nickleby herself. "You know, there is no language of vegetables, which converts a cucumber into a formal declaration of attachment."

"My dear," replied Mrs. Nickleby, tossing her head and looking at the ashes in the grate, "he has done and said all sorts of things."

"Is there no mistake on your part?" asked Nicholas.

"Mistake!" cried Mrs. Nickleby. "Lord, Nicholas, my dear, do you suppose I don't know when a man's in earnest?"

"Well, well!" muttered Nicholas.

"Every time I go to the window," said Mrs. Nickleby, "he kisses one hand, and lays the other upon his heart — of course it's very foolish of him to do so, and I dare say you'll say it's very wrong, but he does it very respectfully — very respectfully indeed — and very tenderly, extremely tenderly. So far, he deserves the greatest credit; there can be no doubt about that. Then, there are the presents which come pouring over the wall every day, and very fine they certainly are, very fine; we had one of the cucumbers at dinner yesterday, and think of pickling the rest for next winter. And last evening," added Mrs. Nickleby, with increased confusion, "he called gently over the wall, as I was walking in the garden, and proposed marriage, and an elopement. His voice is as clear as a bell or a

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musical glass — very like a musical glass indeed — but of course I didn't listen to it. Then, the question is, Nicholas, my dear, what am I to do?"

"Does Kate know of this?" asked Nicholas.

"I have not said a word about it yet," answered his mother.

"Then, for Heaven's sake," rejoined Nicholas, rising, "do not, for it would make her very unhappy. And with regard to what you should do, my dear mother, do what your good sense and feeling, and respect for my father's memory, would prompt. There are a thousand ways in which you can show your dislike of these preposterous and doting attentions. If you act as decidedly as you ought, and they are still continued, and to your annoyance, I can speedily put a stop to them. But I should not interfere in a matter so ridiculous, and attach importance to it, until you have vindicated yourself. Most women can do that, but especially one of your age and condition, in circumstances like these, which are unworthy of a serious thought. I would not shame you by seeming to take them to heart, or treat them earnestly for an instant. Absurd old idiot!"

So saying, Nicholas kissed his mother, and bade her good-night, and they retired to their respective chambers.

To do Mrs. Nickleby justice, her attachment to her children would have prevented her seriously contemplating a second marriage, even if she could have so far conquered her recollections of her late husband as to have any strong inclinations that way. But, although there was no evil and little real selfishness in Mrs. Nickleby's heart, she had a weak

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head and a vain one; and there was something so flattering in being sought (and vainly sought) in marriage at this time of day, that she could not dismiss the passion of the unknown gentleman quite so summarily or lightly as Nicholas appeared to deem becoming.

"As to its being preposterous, and doting, and ridiculous," thought Mrs. Nickleby, communing with herself in her own room, "I don't see that at all. It's hopeless on his part, certainly; but why he should be an absurd old idiot, I confess I don't see. He is not to be supposed to know it's hopeless. Poor fellow! He is to be pitied, *I* think!"

Having made these reflections, Mrs. Nickleby looked in her little dressing-glass, and walking backward a few steps from it, tried to remember who it was who used to say that when Nicholas was one and twenty he would have more the appearance of her brother than her son. Not being able to call the authority to mind, she extinguished her candle, and drew up the window-blind to admit the light of morning, which had, by this time, begun to dawn.

"It's a bad light to distinguish objects in," murmured Mrs. Nickleby, peering into the garden, "and my eyes are not very good — I was short-sighted from a child — but, upon my word, I think there's another large vegetable marrow sticking, at this moment, on the broken glass bottles at the top of the wall!"

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CHAPTER XVII.

COMPRISES CERTAIN PARTICULARS ARISING OUT OF A VISIT OF CONDOLENCE, WHICH MAY PROVE IMPORTANT HEREAFTER. — SMIKE UNEXPECTEDLY ENCOUNTERS A VERY OLD FRIEND, WHO INVITES HIM TO HIS HOUSE, AND WILL TAKE NO DENIAL.

QUITE unconscious of the demonstrations of their amorous neighbor, or their effects upon the susceptible bosom of her mamma, Kate Nickleby had, by this time, begun to enjoy a settled feeling of tranquillity and happiness, to which, even in occasional and transitory glimpses, she had long been a stranger. Living under the same roof with the beloved brother from whom she had been so suddenly and hardly separated: with a mind at ease, and free from any persecutions which could call a blush into her cheek, or a pang into her heart: she seemed to have passed into a new state of being. Her former cheerfulness was restored, her step regained its elasticity and lightness, the color which had forsaken her cheek visited it once again, and Kate Nickleby looked more beautiful than ever.

Such was the result to which Miss La Creevy's ruminations and observations led her, when the cottage had been, as she emphatically said, "thor-

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oughly got to rights, from the chimney-pots to the street-door scraper," and the busy little woman had at length a moment's time to think about its inmates.

"Which I declare I haven't had since I first came down here," said Miss La Creevy; "for I have thought of nothing but hammers, nails, screw-drivers, and gimlets, morning, noon, and night."

"You never bestowed one thought upon yourself, I believe," returned Kate, smiling.

"Upon my word, my dear, when there are so many pleasanter things to think of, I should be a goose if I did," said Miss La Creevy. "By the by, I *have* thought of somebody too. Do you know, that I observe a great change in one of this family —a very extraordinary change?"

"In whom?" asked Kate anxiously. "Not in—"

"Not in your brother, my dear," returned Miss La Creevy, anticipating the close of the sentence, "for he is always the same affectionate good-natured clever creature, with a spice of the—I won't say who—in him when there's any occasion, that he was when I first knew you. No. Smike, as he *will* be called, poor fellow! for he won't hear of a *Mr.* before his name, is greatly altered, even in this short time."

"How?" asked Kate. "Not in health?"

"N-n-o; perhaps not in health exactly," said Miss La Creevy, pausing to consider, "although he is a worn and feeble creature, and has that in his face which it would wring my heart to see in yours. No; not in health."

"How then?"

"I scarcely know," said the miniature-painter.

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"But I have watched him, and he has brought the tears into my eyes many times. It is not a very difficult matter to do that, certainly, for I am easily melted; still I think these came with good cause and reason. I am sure that since he has been here, he has grown, from some strong cause, more conscious of his weak intellect. He feels it more. It gives him greater pain to know that he wanders sometimes, and cannot understand very simple things. I have watched him when you have not been by, my dear, sit brooding by himself, with such a look of pain as I could scarcely bear to see, and then get up and leave the room: so sorrowfully, and in such dejection, that I cannot tell you how it has hurt me. Not three weeks ago, he was a light-hearted busy creature, overjoyed to be in a bustle, and as happy as the day was long. Now, he is another being — the same willing, harmless, faithful, loving creature — but the same in nothing else."

"Surely this will all pass off," said Kate. "Poor fellow!"

"I hope," returned her little friend, with a gravity very unusual in her, "it may. I hope, for the sake of that poor lad, it may. However," said Miss La Creevy, relapsing into the cheerful, chattering tone, which was habitual to her, "I have said my say, and a very long say it is, and a very wrong say too, I shouldn't wonder at all. I shall cheer him up to-night, at all events, for if he is to be my squire all the way to the Strand, I shall talk on, and on, and on, and never leave off, till I have roused him into a laugh at something. So the sooner he goes, the better for him, and the sooner I go, the better for me, I am sure, or else I shall have

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my maid gallivanting with somebody who may rob the house — though what there is to take away, besides tables and chairs, I don't know, except the miniatures: and he is a clever thief who can dispose of them to any great advantage, for *I* can't, I know, and that's the honest truth."

So saying, little Miss La Creevy hid her face in a very flat bonnet, and herself in a very big shawl; and fixing herself tightly into the latter, by means of a large pin, declared that the omnibus might come as soon as it pleased, for she was quite ready.

But there was still Mrs. Nickleby to take leave of; and long before that good lady had concluded some reminiscences bearing upon, and appropriate to, the occasion, the omnibus arrived. This put Miss La Creevy in a great bustle, in consequence whereof, as she secretly rewarded the servant girl with eighteenpence behind the street-door, she pulled out of her reticule tenpennyworth of halfpence, which rolled into all possible corners of the passage, and occupied some considerable time in the picking up. This ceremony had, of course,. to be succeeded by a second kissing of Kate and Mrs. Nickleby, and a gathering together of the little basket and the brown-paper parcel, during which proceedings, "the omnibus," as Miss La Creevy protested, "swore so dreadfully, that it was quite awful to hear it." At length and at last, it made a feint of going away, and then Miss La Creevy darted out, and darted in, apologizing with great volubility to all the passengers, and declaring that she wouldn't purposely have kept them waiting on any account whatever. While she was looking about for a convenient seat, the conductor pushed

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Smike in, and cried that it was all right — though it wasn't — and away went the huge vehicle, with the noise of half a dozen brewers' drays at least.

Leaving it to pursue its journey at the pleasure of the conductor afore-mentioned, who lounged gracefully on his little shelf behind, smoking an odoriferous cigar; and leaving it to stop, or go on, or gallop, or crawl, as that gentleman deemed expedient and advisable; this narrative may embrace the opportunity of ascertaining the condition of Sir Mulberry Hawk, and to what extent he had, by this time, recovered from the injuries consequent on being flung violently from his cabriolet, under the circumstances already detailed.

With a shattered limb, a body severely bruised, a face disfigured by half-healed scars, and pallid from the exhaustion of recent pain and fever, Sir Mulberry Hawk lay stretched upon his back, on the couch to which he was doomed to be a prisoner for some weeks yet to come. Mr. Pyke and Mr. Pluck sat drinking hard in the next room, now and then varying the monotonous murmurs of their conversation with a half-smothered laugh, while the young lord — the only member of the party who was not thoroughly irredeemable, and who really had a kind heart — sat beside his Mentor, with a cigar in his mouth, and read to him, by the light of a lamp, such scraps of intelligence from a paper of the day, as were most likely to yield him interest or amusement.

"Curse those hounds!" said the invalid, turning his head impatiently towards the adjoining room; "will nothing stop their infernal throats?"

Messrs. Pyke and Pluck heard the exclamation,

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and stopped immediately: winking to each other as they did so, and filling their glasses to the brim, as some recompense for the deprivation of speech.

"Damn!" muttered the sick man between his teeth, and writhing impatiently in his bed. "Isn't this mattress hard enough, and the room dull enough, and pain bad enough, but *they* must torture me? What's the time?"

"Half-past eight," replied his friend.

"Here, draw the table nearer, and let us have the cards again," said Sir Mulberry. "More piquet. Come."

It was curious to see how eagerly the sick man, debarred from any change of position save the mere turning of his head from side to side, watched every motion of his friend in the progress of the game; and with what eagerness and interest he played, and yet how warily and coolly. His address and skill were more than twenty times a match for his adversary, who could make little head against them, even when fortune favored him with good cards, which was not often the case. Sir Mulberry won every game; and when his companion threw down the cards, and refused to play any longer, thrust forth his wasted arm and caught up the stakes with a boastful oath, and the same hoarse laugh, though considerably lowered in tone, that had resounded in Ralph Nickleby's dining-room, months before.

While he was thus occupied, his man appeared, to announce that Mr. Ralph Nickleby was below, and wished to know how he was to-night.

"Better," said Sir Mulberry impatiently.

"Mr. Nickleby wishes to know, sir—"

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"I tell you, better," replied Sir Mulberry, striking his hand upon the table.

The man hesitated for a moment or two, and then said that Mr. Nickleby had requested permission to see Sir Mulberry Hawk, if it was not inconvenient.

"It *is* inconvenient. I can't see him. I can't see anybody," said his master, more violently than before. "You know that, you blockhead."

"I am very sorry, sir," returned the man. "But Mr. Nickleby pressed so much, sir —"

The fact was, that Ralph Nickleby had bribed the man, who, being anxious to earn his money with a view to future favors, held the door in his hand, and ventured to linger still.

"Did he say whether he had any business to speak about?" inquired Sir Mulberry, after a little impatient consideration.

"No, sir. He said he wished to see you, sir. Particularly, Mr. Nickleby said, sir."

"Tell him to come up. Here," cried Sir Mulberry, calling the man back, as he passed his hand over his disfigured face, "move that lamp, and put it on the stand behind me. Wheel that table away, and place a chair there — further off. Leave it so."

The man obeyed these directions as if he quite comprehended the motive with which they were dictated, and left the room. Lord Frederick Verisopht, remarking that he would look in presently, strolled into the adjoining apartment, and closed the folding door behind him.

Then was heard a subdued footstep on the stairs; and Ralph Nickleby, hat in hand, crept softly into the room, with his body bent forward as if in pro-

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found respect, and his eyes fixed upon the face of his worthy client.

"Well, Nickleby," said Sir Mulberry, motioning him to the chair by the couch side, and waving his hand in assumed carelessness, "I have had a bad accident, you see."

"I see," rejoined Ralph, with the same steady gaze. "Bad, indeed! I should not have known you, Sir Mulberry. Dear, dear! This *is* bad."

Ralph's manner was one of profound humility and respect; and the low tone of voice was that which the gentlest consideration for a sick man would have taught a visitor to assume. But the expression of his face, Sir Mulberry's being averted, was in extraordinary contrast; and as he stood, in his usual attitude, calmly looking on the prostrate form before him, all that part of his features which was not cast into shadow by his protruding and contracted brows, bore the impress of a sarcastic smile.

"Sit down," said Sir Mulberry, turning towards him, as though by a violent effort. "Am I a sight, that you stand gazing there?"

As he turned his face, Ralph recoiled a step or two, and making as though he were irresistibly impelled to express astonishment, but was determined not to do so, sat down with well-acted confusion.

"I have inquired at the door, Sir Mulberry, every day," said Ralph, "twice a day, indeed, at first — and to-night, presuming upon old acquaintance, and past transactions by which we have mutually benefited in some degree, I could not resist soliciting admission to your chamber. Have you — have you suffered much?" said Ralph, bending forward, and

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allowing the same harsh smile to gather upon his face, as the other closed his eyes.

"More than enough to please me, and less than enough to please some broken-down hacks that you and I know of, and who lay their ruin between us, I dare say," returned Sir Mulberry, tossing his arm restlessly upon the coverlet.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders in deprecation of the intense irritation with which this had been said; for there was an aggravating, cold distinctness in his speech and manner which so grated on the sick man that he could scarcely endure it.

"And what is it in these 'past transactions,' that brought you here to-night?" asked Sir Mulberry.

"Nothing," replied Ralph. "There are some bills of my lord's which need renewal; but let them be till you are well. I — I — came," said Ralph, speaking more slowly, and with harsher emphasis, "I came to say how grieved I am that any relative of mine, although disowned by me, should have inflicted such punishment on you as —"

"Punishment!" interposed Sir Mulberry.

"I know it has been a severe one," said Ralph, wilfully mistaking the meaning of the interruption, "and that has made me the more anxious to tell you that I disown this vagabond — that I acknowledge him as no kin of mine — and that I leave him to take his deserts from you, and every man besides. You may wring his neck if you please. *I* shall not interfere."

"This story that they tell me here, has got abroad then, has it?" asked Sir Mulberry, clenching his hands and teeth.

"Noised in all directions," replied Ralph. "Every

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club and gaming-room has rung with it. There has been a good song made about it, as I am told," said Ralph, looking eagerly at his questioner. "I have not heard it myself, not being in the way of such things, but I have been told it's even printed — for private circulation — but that's all over town, of course."

"It's a lie!" said Sir Mulberry; "I tell you it's all a lie. The mare took fright."

"They *say* he frightened her," observed Ralph, in the same unmoved and quiet manner. "Some say he frightened you, but *that's* a lie, I know. I have said that boldly — oh, a score of times! I am a peaceable man, but I can't hear folks tell that of you — no, no."

When Sir Mulberry found coherent words to utter, Ralph bent forward with his hand to his ear, and a face as calm as if its every line of sternness had been cast in iron.

"When I am off this cursed bed," said the invalid, actually striking at his broken leg in the ecstasy of his passion, "I'll have such revenge as never man had yet. By G— I will! Accident favoring him, he has marked me for a week or two, but I'll put a mark on him that he shall carry to his grave. I'll slit his nose and ears — flog him — maim him for life. I'll do more than that; I'll drag that pattern of chastity, that pink of prudery, the delicate sister, through —"

It might have been that even Ralph's cold blood tingled in his cheeks at that moment. It might have been that Sir Mulberry remembered, that, knave and usurer as he was, he must, in some early time of infancy, have twined his arm about her

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father's neck. He stopped, and menacing with his hand, confirmed the unuttered threat with a tremendous oath.

"It is a galling thing," said Ralph, after a short term of silence, during which he had eyed the sufferer keenly, "to think that the man about town, the rake, the *roué*, the rook of twenty seasons, should be brought to this pass by a mere boy!"

Sir Mulberry darted a wrathful look at him, but Ralph's eyes were bent upon the ground, and his face wore no other expression than one of thoughtfulness.

"A raw, slight stripling," continued Ralph, "against a man whose very weight might crush him; to say nothing of his skill in — I am right, I think," said Ralph, raising his eyes, "you *were* a patron of the ring once, were you not?"

The sick man made an impatient gesture, which Ralph chose to consider as one of acquiescence.

"Ha!" he said, "I thought so. That was before I knew you, but I was pretty sure I couldn't be mistaken. He is light and active, I suppose. But those were slight advantages compared with yours. Luck, luck — these hang-dog outcasts have it."

"He'll need the most he has, when I am well again," said Sir Mulberry Hawk, "let him fly where he will."

"Oh!" returned Ralph quickly, "he doesn't dream of that. He is here, good sir, waiting your pleasure — here in London, walking the streets at noonday; carrying it off jauntily; looking for you, I swear," said Ralph, his face darkening, and his own hatred getting the upper hand of him, for the first time, as this gay picture of Nicholas presented itself; "if

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we were only citizens of a country where it could be safely done, I'd give good money to have him stabbed to the heart and rolled into the kennel for the dogs to tear."

As Ralph, somewhat to the surprise of his old client, vented this little piece of sound family feeling, and took up his hat preparatory to departing, Lord Frederick Verisopht looked in.

"Why, what in the deyvle's name, Hawk, have you and Nickleby been talking about?" said the young man. "I neyver heard such an insufferable riot. Croak, croak, croak. Bow, wow, wow. What has it all been about?"

"Sir Mulberry has been angry, my lord," said Ralph, looking towards the couch.

"Not about money, I hope? Nothing has gone wrong in business, has it, Nickleby?"

"No, my lord, no," returned Ralph. "On that point we always agree. Sir Mulberry has been calling to mind the cause of—"

There was neither necessity nor opportunity for Ralph to proceed; for Sir Mulberry took up the theme, and vented his threats and oaths against Nicholas, almost as ferociously as before.

Ralph, who was no common observer, was surprised to see that as this tirade proceeded, the manner of Lord Frederick Verisopht, who at the commencement had been twirling his whiskers with a most dandified and listless air, underwent a complete alteration. He was still more surprised when, Sir Mulberry ceasing to speak, the young lord angrily, and almost unaffectedly, requested never to have the subject renewed in his presence.

"Mind that, Hawk!" he added, with unusual

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energy. "I never will be a party to, or permit, if I can help it, a cowardly attack upon this young fellow."

"Cowardly!" interrupted his friend.

"Ye-es," said the other, turning full upon him. "If you had told him who you were; if you had given him your card, and found out, afterwards, that his station or character prevented your fighting him, it would have been bad enough then; upon my soul it would have been bad enough then. As it is, you did wrong. I did wrong, too, not to interfere, and I am sorry for it. What happened to you afterwards, was as much the consequence of accident as design, and more your fault than his; and it shall not, with my knowledge, be cruelly visited upon him — it shall not indeed."

With this emphatic repetition of his concluding words, the young lord turned upon his heel; but before he had reached the adjoining room he turned back again, and said, with even greater vehemence than he had displayed before, —

"I do believe, now; upon my honor I do believe, that the sister is as virtuous and modest a young lady as she is a handsome one; and of the brother, I say this, that he acted as her brother should, and in a manly and spirited manner. And I only wish, with all my heart and soul, that any one of us came out of this matter half as well as he does."

So saying, Lord Frederick Verisopht walked out of the room, leaving Ralph Nickleby and Sir Mulberry in most unpleasant astonishment.

"Is this your pupil?" asked Ralph softly, "or has he come fresh from some country parson?"

"Green fools take these fits sometimes," replied

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Sir Mulberry Hawk, biting his lip, and pointing to the door. "Leave him to me."

Ralph exchanged a familiar look with his old acquaintance; for they had suddenly grown confidential again in this alarming surprise; and took his way home, thoughtfully and slowly.

While these things were being said and done, and long before they were concluded, the omnibus had disgorged Miss La Creevy and her escort, and they had arrived at her own door. Now, the good-nature of the little miniature-painter would by no means allow of Smike's walking back again, until he had been previously refreshed with just a sip of something comfortable and a mixed biscuit or so; and Smike entertaining no objection either to the sip of something comfortable, or the mixed biscuit, but considering on the contrary that they would be a very pleasant preparation for a walk to Bow, it fell out that he delayed much longer than he originally intended, and that it was some half-hour after dusk when he set forth on his journey home.

There was no likelihood of his losing his way, for it lay quite straight before him, and he had walked into town with Nicholas, and back alone, almost every day. So, Miss La Creevy and he shook hands with mutual confidence, and, being charged with more kind remembrances to Mrs. and Miss Nickleby, Smike started off.

At the foot of Ludgate Hill, he turned a little out of the road to satisfy his curiosity by having a look at Newgate. After staring up at the sombre walls, from the opposite side of the way, with great care and dread for some minutes, he turned back again into the old track, and walked briskly through the

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City; stopping now and then to gaze in at the window of some particularly attractive shop, then running for a little way, then stopping again, and so on, as any other country lad might do.

He had been gazing for a long time through a jeweller's window, wishing he could take some of the beautiful trinkets home as a present, and imagining what delight they would afford if he could, when the clocks struck three-quarters past eight; roused by the sound, he hurried on at a very quick pace, and was crossing the corner of a by-street when he felt himself violently brought to, with a jerk so sudden that he was obliged to cling to a lamp-post to save himself from falling. At the same moment, a small boy clung tight round his legs, and a shrill cry of "Here he is, father! Hooray!" vibrated in his ears.

Smike knew that voice too well. He cast his despairing eyes downward towards the form from which it had proceeded, and, shuddering from head to foot, looked round. Mr. Squeers had hooked him in the coat-collar with the handle of his umbrella, and was hanging on at the other end with all his might and main. The cry of triumph proceeded from Master Wackford, who, regardless of all his kicks and struggles, clung to him with the tenacity of a bull-dog!

One glance showed him this; and in that one glance the terrified creature became utterly powerless and unable to utter a sound.

"Here's a go!" cried Mr. Squeers, gradually coming hand over hand down the umbrella, and only unhooking it when he had got tight hold of the victim's collar. "Here's a delicious go! Wackford, my boy, call up one of them coaches."

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A sudden recognition unexpected on both sides.

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"A coach, father!" cried little Wackford.

"Yes, a coach, sir," replied Squeers, feasting his eyes upon the countenance of Smike. "Damn the expense. Let's have him in a coach."

"What's he been a-doing of?" asked a laborer, with a hod of bricks, against whom and a fellow-laborer Mr. Squeers had backed, on the first jerk of the umbrella.

"Everything!" replied Mr. Squeers, looking fixedly at his old pupil in a sort of rapturous trance. "Everything — running away, sir — joining in bloodthirsty attacks upon his master — there's nothing that's bad that he hasn't done. Oh, what a delicious go is this here, good Lord!"

The man looked from Squeers to Smike; but such mental faculties as the poor fellow possessed, had utterly deserted him. The coach came up; Master Wackford entered; Squeers pushed in his prize, and following close at his heels, pulled up the glasses. The coachman mounted his box and drove slowly off, leaving the two bricklayers, and an old apple-woman, and a town-made little boy returning from an evening school, who had been the only witnesses of the scene, to meditate upon it at their leisure.

Mr. Squeers sat himself down on the opposite seat to the unfortunate Smike, and, planting his hands firmly on his knees, looked at him for some five minutes, when, seeming to recover from his trance, he uttered a loud laugh, and slapped his old pupil's face several times — taking the right and left sides alternately.

"It isn't a dream!" said Squeers. "That's real flesh and blood! I know the feel of it!" and being

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quite assured of his good-fortune by these experiments, Mr. Squeers administered a few boxes on the ear, lest the entertainments should seem to partake of sameness, and laughed louder and longer at every one.

"Your mother will be fit to jump out of her skin, my boy, when she hears of this," said Squeers to his son.

"Oh, won't she, though, father?" replied Master Wackford.

"To think," said Squeers, "that you and me should be turning out of a street, and come upon him at the very nick; and that I should have him tight, at only one cast of the umbrella, as if I had hooked him with a grappling-iron! — Ha, ha!"

"Didn't I catch hold of his leg, neither, father?" said little Wackford.

"You did; like a good 'un, my boy," said Mr. Squeers, patting his son's head, "and you shall have the best button-over jacket and waistcoat that the next new boy brings down, as a reward of merit — mind that. You always keep on in the same path, and do them things that you see your father do, and when you die you'll go right slap to heaven and no questions asked."

Improving the occasion in these words, Mr. Squeers patted his son's head again, and then patted Smike's — but harder; and inquired in a bantering tone how he found himself by this time.

"I must go home," replied Smike, looking wildly round.

"To be sure you must. You're about right there," replied Mr. Squeers. "You'll go home very soon, you will. You'll find yourself at the peace-

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ful village of Dotheboys, in Yorkshire, in something under a week's time, my young friend; and the next time you get away from there, I give you leave to keep away. Where's the clothes you run off in, you ungrateful robber?" said Mr. Squeers, in a severe voice.

Smike glanced at the neat attire which the care of Nicholas had provided for him, and wrung his hands.

"Do you know that I could hang you up, outside of the Old Bailey, for making away with them articles of property?" said Squeers. "Do you know that it's a hanging matter — and I ain't quite certain whether it ain't an anatomy one besides — to walk off with up'ards of the valley of five pound from a dwelling-house? Eh — do you know that? What do you suppose was the worth of them clothes you had? Do you know that that Wellington boot you wore cost eight and twenty shillings when it was a pair, and the shoe seven and six? But you came to the right shop for mercy when you came to me, and thank your stars that it *is* me as has got to serve you with the article."

Anybody not in Mr. Squeers's confidence would have supposed that he was quite out of the article in question, instead of having a large stock on hand ready for all comers; nor would the opinion of sceptical persons have undergone much alteration when he followed up the remark by poking Smike in the chest with the ferrule of his umbrella, and dealing a smart shower of blows, with the ribs of the same instrument, upon his head and shoulders.

"I never threshed a boy in a hackney coach before," said Mr. Squeers, when he stopped to rest.

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"There's inconveniency in it, but the novelty gives it a sort of relish, too!"

Poor Smike! He warded off the blows, as well as he could, and now shrunk into a corner of the coach, with his head resting on his hands, and his elbows on his knees; he was stunned and stupefied, and had no more idea that any act of his would enable him to escape from the all-powerful Squeers, now that he had no friend to speak to or to advise with, than he had had in all the weary years of his Yorkshire life which preceded the arrival of Nicholas.

The journey seemed endless; street after street was entered and left behind; and still they went jolting on. At last Mr. Squeers began to thrust his head out of the window every half minute, and to bawl a variety of directions to the coachman; and after passing, with some difficulty, through several mean streets which the appearance of the houses and the bad state of the road denoted to have been recently built, Mr. Squeers suddenly tugged at the check-string with all his might, and cried, "Stop!"

"What are you pulling a man's arm off for?" said the coachman, looking angrily down.

"That's the house," replied Squeers. "The second of them four little houses, one story high, with the green shutters — there's a brass plate on the door, with the name of Snawley."

"Couldn't you say that without wrenching a man's limbs off his body?" inquired the coachman.

"No!" bawled Mr. Squeers. "Say another word, and I'll summons you for having a broken winder. Stop!"

Obedient to this direction, the coach stopped at

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Mr. Snawley's door. Mr. Snawley may be remembered as the sleek and sanctified gentleman who confided two sons (*in law*) to the parental care of Mr. Squeers, as narrated in the fourth chapter of this history. Mr. Snawley's house was on the extreme borders of some new settlements adjoining Somers Town, and Mr. Squeers had taken lodgings therein for a short time, as his stay was longer than usual, and the Saracen, having experience of Master Wackford's appetite, had declined to receive him on any other terms than as a full-grown customer.

"Here we are!" said Squeers, hurrying Smike into the little parlor, where Mr. Snawley and his wife were taking a lobster supper. "Here's the vagrant — the felon — the rebel — the monster of unthankfulness."

"What! The boy that run away!" cried Snawley, resting his knife and fork upright on the table, and opening his eyes to their full width.

"The very boy," said Squeers, putting his fist close to Smike's nose, and drawing it away again, and repeating the process several times, with a vicious aspect. "If there wasn't a lady present, I'd fetch him such a — never mind, I'll owe it him."

And here Mr. Squeers related how, and in what manner, and when and where, he had picked up the runaway.

"It's clear that there has been a Providence in it, sir," said Mr. Snawley, casting down his eyes with an air of humility, and elevating his fork, with a bit of lobster on the top of it, towards the ceiling.

"Providence is against him, no doubt," replied Mr. Squeers, scratching his nose. "Of course; that was to be expected. Anybody might have known that."

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"Hard-heartedness and evil-doing will never prosper, sir," said Mr. Snawley.

"Never was such a thing known," rejoined Squeers, taking a little roll of notes from his pocket-book, to see that they were all safe.

"I have been, Mrs. Snawley," said Mr. Squeers, when he had satisfied himself upon this point, "I have been that chap's benefactor, feeder, teacher, and clother. I have been that chap's classical, commercial, mathematical, philosophical, and trigonomical friend. My son — my only son, Wackford — has been his brother; Mrs. Squeers has been his mother, grandmother, aunt, — ah! and I may say uncle too, all in one. She never cottoned to anybody, except them two engaging and delightful boys of yours, as she cottoned to this chap. What's my return? What's come of my milk of human kindness? It turns into curds and whey when I look at him."

"Well it may, sir," said Mrs. Snawley. "Oh! Well it may, sir."

"Where has he been all this time?" inquired Snawley. "Has he been living with — ?"

"Ah, sir!" interposed Squeers, confronting him again. "Have you been a-living with that there devilish Nickleby, sir?"

But no threats or cuffs could elicit from Smike one word of reply to this question; for he had internally resolved that he would rather perish in the wretched prison to which he was again about to be consigned, than utter one syllable which could involve his first and true friend. He had already called to mind the strict injunctions of secrecy as to his past life, which Nicholas had laid upon him

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when they travelled from Yorkshire; and a confused and perplexed idea that his benefactor might have committed some terrible crime in bringing him away, which would render him liable to heavy punishment if detected, had contributed, in some degree, to reduce him to his present state of apathy and terror.

Such were the thoughts — if to visions so imperfect and undefined as those which wandered through his enfeebled brain, the term can be applied — which were present to the mind of Smike, and rendered him deaf alike to intimidation and persuasion. Finding every effort useless, Mr. Squeers conducted him to a little back-room upstairs, where he was to pass the night; and, taking the precaution of removing his shoes, and coat, and waistcoat, and also of locking the door on the outside, lest he should muster up sufficient energy to make an attempt at escape, that worthy gentleman left him to his meditations.

What those meditations were, and how the poor creature's heart sunk within him when he thought — when did he, for a moment, cease to think? — of his late home, and the dear friends and familiar faces with which it was associated, cannot be told. To prepare the mind for such a heavy sleep, its growth must be stopped by rigor and cruelty in childhood; there must be years of misery and suffering, lightened by no ray of hope; the chords of the heart, which beat a quick response to the voice of gentleness and affection, must have rusted and broken in their secret places, and bear the lingering echo of no old word of love or kindness. Gloomy, indeed, must have been the short day, and dull the

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long, long twilight, preceding such a night of intellect as his.

There were voices which would have roused him, even then; but their welcome tones could not penetrate there; and he crept to bed the same listless, hopeless, blighted creature, that Nicholas had first found him at the Yorkshire school.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

IN WHICH ANOTHER OLD FRIEND ENCOUNTERS SMIKE, VERY OPPORTUNELY AND TO SOME PURPOSE.

The night, fraught with so much bitterness to one poor soul, had given place to a bright and cloudless summer morning, when a north-country mail-coach traversed, with cheerful noise, the yet silent streets of Islington, and, giving brisk note of its approach with the lively winding of the guard's horn, clattered onward to its halting-place hard by the Post-Office.

The only outside passenger was a burly, honest-looking countryman on the box, who, with his eyes fixed upon the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, appeared so wrapt in admiring wonder, as to be quite insensible to all the bustle of getting out the bags and parcels, until one of the coach windows being let sharply down, he looked round, and encountered a pretty female face which was just then thrust out.

"See there, lass!" bawled the countryman, pointing towards the object of his admiration. "There be Paul's Church. Ecod, he be a soizable 'un, he be."

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"Goodness, John! I shouldn't have thought it could have been half the size. What a monster!"

"Monsther! — Ye're aboot right there, I reckon, Mrs. Browdie," said the countryman good-humoredly, as he came slowly down in his huge top-coat; "and wa'at dost thee tak yon place to be noo — thot 'un ower the wa'? Ye'd never coom near it 'gin ye thried for twolve moonths. It's na' but a Poast-Office! Ho! ho! They need to charge for dooble latthers. A Poast-Office! Wa'at dost thee think o' thot? Ecod, if thot's on'y a Poast-Office, I'd loike to see where the Lord Mayor o' Lunnun lives."

So saying, John Browdie — for he it was — opened the coach-door, and tapping Mrs. Browdie, late Miss Price, on the cheek as he looked in, burst into a boisterous fit of laughter.

"Weel!" said John. "Dang my bootuns if she bean't asleep agean!"

"She's been asleep all night, and was all yesterday, except for a minute or two now and then," replied John Browdie's choice, "and I was very sorry when she woke, for she has been *so* cross!"

The subject of these remarks was a slumbering figure, so muffled in shawl and cloak, that it would have been matter of impossibility to guess at its sex but for a brown beaver bonnet and green veil which ornamented the head, and which, having been crushed and flattened, for two hundred and fifty miles, in that particular angle of the vehicle from which the lady's snores now proceeded, presented an appearance sufficiently ludicrous to have moved less risible muscles than those of John Browdie's ruddy face.

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"Hollo!" cried John, twitching one end of the dragged veil. "Coom, wakken oop, will 'ee?"

After several burrowings into the old corner, and many exclamations of impatience and fatigue, the figure struggled into a sitting posture; and there, under a mass of crumpled beaver, and surrounded by a semicircle of blue curl-papers, were the delicate features of Miss Fanny Squeers.

"Oh, 'Tilda!" cried Miss Squeers, "how you have been kicking of me through this blessed night!"

"Well, I do like that," replied her friend, laughing, "when you have had nearly the whole coach to yourself."

"Don't deny it, 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers impressively, "because you have, and it's no use to go attempting to say you haven't. You mightn't have known it in your sleep, 'Tilda, but I haven't closed my eyes for a single wink, and so I *think* I am to be believed."

With which reply, Miss Squeers adjusted the bonnet and veil, which nothing but supernatural interference and an utter suspension of nature's laws could have reduced to any shape or form; and evidently flattering herself that it looked uncommonly neat, brushed off the sandwich-crumbs and bits of biscuit which had accumulated in her lap, and availing herself of John Browdie's proffered arm, descended from the coach.

"Noo," said John, when a hackney coach had been called, and the ladies and the luggage hurried in, "gang to the Sarah's Head, mun."

"To the *vere?*" cried the coachman.

"Lawk, Mr. Browdie!" interrupted Miss Squeers. "The idea! Saracen's Head."

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"Sure-ly," said John, "I know'd it was something aboot Sarah's Son's Head. Dost thou know thot?"

"Oh, ah — I know that," replied the coachman gruffly, as he banged the door.

"'Tilda, dear — really," remonstrated Miss Squeers, "we shall be taken for I don't know what."

"Let them tak us as they foind us," said John Browdie; "we dean't come to Lunnun to do nought but 'joy oursel, do we?"

"I hope not, Mr. Browdie," replied Miss Squeers, looking singularly dismal.

"Well, then," said John, "it's no matther. I've only been a married man fower days, 'account of poor old feyther deein, and puttin' it off. Here be a weddin' party — broide and broide'smaid, and the groom — if a mun dean't 'joy himsel noo, when ought he, hey? Drat it all, thot's what I want to know."

So, in order that he might begin to enjoy himself at once, and lose no time, Mr. Browdie gave his wife a hearty kiss, and succeeded in wresting another from Miss Squeers, after a maidenly resistance of scratching and struggling on the part of that young lady, which was not quite over when they reached the Saracen's Head.

Here, the party straightway retired to rest; the refreshment of sleep being necessary after so long a journey; and here they met again about noon, to a substantial breakfast, spread by direction of Mr. John Browdie, in a small private room upstairs, commanding an uninterrupted view of the stables.

To have seen Miss Squeers now, divested of the brown beaver, the green veil, and the blue curl-papers, and arrayed in all the virgin splendor of a

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white frock and spencer, with a white muslin bonnet, and an imitative damask rose in full bloom on the inside thereof: her luxuriant crop of hair arranged in curls so tight that it was impossible they could come out by any accident, and her bonnet-cap trimmed with little damask roses, which might be supposed to be so many promising scions of the big one — to have seen all this, and to have seen the broad damask belt, matching both the family rose and the little ones, which encircled her slender waist, and by a happy ingenuity took off from the shortness of the spencer behind, — to have beheld all this, and to have taken further into account the coral bracelets (rather short of beads, and with a very visible black string) which clasped her wrists, and the coral necklace which rested on her neck, supporting, outside her frock, a lonely cornelian heart, typical of her own disengaged affections — to have contemplated all these mute but expressive appeals to the purest feelings of our nature, might have thawed the frost of age, and added new and inextinguishable fuel to the fire of youth.

The waiter was touched. Waiter as he was, he had human passions and feelings, and he looked very hard at Miss Squeers as he handed the muffins.

"Is my pa in, do you know?" asked Miss Squeers with dignity.

"Beg your pardon, miss?"

"My pa," repeated Miss Squeers; "is he in?"

"In where, miss?"

"In here — in the house!" replied Miss Squeers. "My pa — Mr. Wackford Squeers — he's stopping here. Is he at home?"

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"I didn't know there was any gen'l'man of that name in the house, miss," replied the waiter. "There may be, in the coffee-room."

May be. Very pretty this, indeed! Here was Miss Squeers, who had been depending, all the way to London, upon showing her friends how much at home she would be, and how much respectful notice her name and connections would excite, told that her father *might* be there! "As if he was a feller!" observed Miss Squeers, with emphatic indignation.

"Ye'd betther inquire, mun," said John Browdie. "An' hond up another pigeon-pie, will 'ee? Dang the chap," muttered John, looking into the empty dish as the waiter retired; "does he ca' this a pie —three yoong pigeons and a troifling matther o' steak, and a crust so loight that you doan't know when it's in your mooth and when it's gane? I wonder hoo many pies goes to a breakfast!"

After a short interval, which John Browdie employed upon the ham and a cold round of beef, the waiter returned with another pie, and the information that Mr. Squeers was not stopping in the house, but that he came there every day, and that directly he arrived, he should be shown upstairs. With this he retired; and he had not retired two minutes, when he returned with Mr. Squeers and his hopeful son.

"Why, who'd have thought of this?" said Mr. Squeers, when he had saluted the party, and received some private family intelligence from his daughter.

"Who, indeed, pa!" replied that young lady spitefully. "But you see 'Tilda *is* married at last."

"And I stond threat for a soight o' Lunnun,

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schoolmeasther," said John, vigorously attacking the pie.

"One of them things that young men do when they get married," returned Squeers; "and as runs through with their money like nothing at all! How much better wouldn't it be, now, to save it up for the eddication of any little boys, for instance! They come on you," said Mr. Squeers in a moralizing way, "before you're aware of it; mine did upon me."

"Will 'ee pick a bit?" said John.

"I won't myself," returned Squeers; "but if you'll just let little Wackford tuck into something fat, I'll be obliged to you. Give it him in his fingers, else the waiter charges it on, and there's lot of profit on this sort of vittles without that. If you hear the waiter coming, sir, shove it in your pocket and look out of the window, d'ye hear?"

"I'm awake, father," replied the dutiful Wackford.

"Well," said Squeers, turning to his daughter, "it's your turn to be married next. You must make haste."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry," said Miss Squeers very sharply.

"No, Fanny?" cried her old friend with some archness.

"No, 'Tilda," replied Miss Squeers, shaking her head vehemently. "*I* can wait."

"So can the young men, it seems, Fanny," observed Mrs. Browdie.

"They ain't draw'd into it by *me*, 'Tilda," retorted Miss Squeers.

"No," returned her friend; "that's exceedingly true."

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The sarcastic tone of this reply might have provoked a rather acrimonious retort from Miss Squeers, who, besides being of a constitutionally vicious temper — aggravated, just now, by travel and recent jolting — was somewhat irritated by old recollections and the failure of her own designs upon Mr. Browdie; and the acrimonious retort might have led to a great many other retorts, which might have led to Heaven knows what, if the subject of conversation had not been, at that precise moment, accidentally changed by Mr. Squeers himself.

"What do you think?" said that gentleman; "who do you suppose we have laid hands on, Wackford and me?"

"Pa! not Mr. —?" Miss Squeers was unable to finish the sentence, but Mrs. Browdie did it for her, and added, "Nickleby?"

"No," said Squeers. "But next door to him, though."

"You can't mean Smike?" cried Miss Squeers, clapping her hands.

"Yes, I can, though," rejoined her father. "I've got him, hard and fast."

"Wa'at!" exclaimed John Browdie, pushing away his plate. "Got that poor — dom'd scoondrel, — where?"

"Why, in the top back-room, at my lodging," replied Squeers, "with him on one side, and the key on the other."

"At thy loodgin'! Thee'st gotten him at thy loodgin'? Ho! ho! The schoolmeasther agin all England. Give us thee hond, mun; — I'm darned but I must shak thee by the hond for thot. — Gotten him at thy loodgin'?"

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"Yes," replied Squeers, staggering in his chair under the congratulatory blow on the chest which the stout Yorkshireman dealt him — "thankee. Don't do it again. You mean it kindly, I know, but it hurts rather — yes, there he is. That's not so bad, is it?"

"Ba'ad!" repeated John Browdie. "It's eneaf to scare a mun to hear tell on."

"I thought it would surprise you a bit," said Squeers, rubbing his hands. "It was pretty neatly done, and pretty quick too."

"Hoo wor it?" inquired John, sitting down close to him. "Tell us all aboot it, mun; coom, quick!"

Although he could not keep pace with John Browdie's impatience, Mr. Squeers related the lucky chance by which Smike had fallen into his hands, as quickly as he could, and, except when he was interrupted by the admiring remarks of his auditors, paused not in the recital until he had brought it to an end.

"For fear he should give me the slip, by any chance," observed Squeers, when he had finished, looking very cunning, "I've taken three outsides for to-morrow morning — for Wackford and him and me — and have arranged to leave the accounts and the new boys to the agent, don't you see? So it's very lucky you come to-day, or you'd have missed us; and as it is, unless you could come and tea with me to-night, we sha'n't see anything more of you before we go away."

"Dean't say anoother wurd," returned the Yorkshireman, shaking him by the hand. "We'd coom, if it was twonty mile."

"No, would you, though?" returned Mr. Squeers,

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who had not expected quite such a ready acceptance of his invitation, or he would have considered twice before he gave it.

John Browdie's only reply was another squeeze of the hand, and an assurance that they would not begin to see London till to-morrow, so that they might be at Mr. Snawley's at six o'clock without fail; and after some further conversation, Mr. Squeers and his son departed.

During the remainder of the day, Mr. Browdie was in a very odd and excitable state; bursting occasionally into an explosion of laughter, and then taking up his hat and running into the coach-yard to have it out by himself. He was very restless too, constantly walking in and out, and snapping his fingers, and dancing scraps of uncouth country dances, and, in short, conducting himself in such a very extraordinary manner, that Miss Squeers opined he was going mad, and, begging her dear 'Tilda not to distress herself, communicated her suspicions in so many words. Mrs. Browdie, however, without discovering any great alarm, observed that she had seen him so once before, and that although he was almost sure to be ill after it, it would not be anything very serious, and therefore he was better left alone.

The result proved her to be perfectly correct; for, while they were all sitting in Mr. Snawley's parlor that night, and just as it was beginning to get dusk, John Browdie was taken so ill, and seized with such an alarming dizziness in the head, that the whole company were thrown into the utmost consternation. His good lady, indeed, was the only person present who retained presence of mind

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enough to observe that if he were allowed to lie down on Mr. Squeers's bed for an hour or so, and left entirely to himself, he would be sure to recover again almost as quickly as he had been taken ill. Nobody could refuse to try the effect of so reasonable a proposal, before sending for a surgeon. Accordingly, John was supported upstairs, with great difficulty; being a monstrous weight, and regularly tumbling down two steps every time they hoisted him up three; and, being laid on the bed, was left in charge of his wife, who, after a short interval, re-appeared in the parlor, with the gratifying intelligence that he had fallen fast asleep.

Now, the fact was, that at that particular moment, John Browdie was sitting on the bed with the reddest face ever seen, cramming the corner of the pillow into his mouth, to prevent his roaring out loud with laughter. He had no sooner succeeded in suppressing his emotion, than he slipped off his shoes, and creeping to the adjoining room where the prisoner was confined, turned the key, which was on the outside, and darting in, covered Smike's mouth with his huge hand before he could utter a sound.

"Ods-bobs, dost thee not know me, mun?" whispered the Yorkshireman to the bewildered lad. "Browdie, — chap as met thee efther schoolmeasther was banged?"

"Yes, yes," cried Smike. "Oh! help me."

"Help thee!" replied John, stopping his mouth again, the instant he had said this much. "Thee didn't need help, if thee warn't as silly yoongster as ever draw'd breath. Wa'at did 'ee come here for, then?"

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"He brought me; oh! he brought me," cried Smike.

"Brout thee!" replied John. "Why didn't 'ee punch his head, or lay theeself doon and kick, and squeal out for the pollis? I'd ha' licked a doozen such as him when I was yoong as thee. But thee be'est a poor broken-doon chap," said John sadly, "and God forgi' me for bragging ower yan o' his weakest creeturs!"

Smike opened his mouth to speak, but John Browdie stopped him.

"Stan' still," said the Yorkshireman, "and doant'ee speak a morsel o' talk till I tell 'ee."

With this caution, John Browdie shook his head significantly, and drawing a screw-driver from his pocket, took off the box of the lock in a very deliberate and workmanlike manner, and laid it, together with the implement, on the floor.

"See thot?" said John. "Thot be thy doin'. Noo, coot awa'!"

Smike looked vacantly at him, as if unable to comprehend his meaning.

"I say, coot awa'," repeated John hastily. "Dost thee know where thee livest? Thee dost? Weel. Are yon thy clothes, or schoolmeasther's?"

"Mine," replied Smike, as the Yorkshireman hurried him to the adjoining room, and pointed out a pair of shoes and a coat which were lying on a chair.

"On wi' 'em," said John, forcing the wrong arm into the wrong sleeve, and winding the tails of the coat round the fugitive's neck. "Noo, foller me, and when thee get'st ootside door, turn to the right, and they wean't see thee pass."

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"But — but — he'll hear me shut the door," replied Smike, trembling from head to foot.

"Then dean't shut it at all," retorted John Browdie. "Dang it, thee bean't afeard o' schoolmeasther's takkin cold, I hope?"

"N-no," said Smike, his teeth chattering in his head. "But he brought me back before, and will again. He will, he will indeed."

"He wull, he wull!" replied John impatiently. "He wean't, he wean't. Look'ee! I wont to do this neighborly loike, and let them think thee's gotten awa' o' theeself, but if he cooms oot o' thot parlor awhiles theer't clearing off, he mun have mercy on his oun boans, for I wean't. If he foinds it oot, soon efther, I'll put 'un on a wrong scent, I warrant 'ee. But if thee keep'st a good hart, thee'lt be at whoam afore they know thee'st gotten off. Coom!"

Smike, who comprehended just enough of this to know it was intended as encouragement, prepared to follow with tottering steps, when John whispered in his ear, —

"Thee'lt just tell yoong Measther that I'm sploiced to 'Tilly Price, and to be heerd on at the Saracen by latther, and that I bean't jealous of 'un — dang it, I'm loike to boost when I think o' that neight! 'Cod, I think I see 'un now, a-powderin' awa' at the thin bread an' butther!"

It was rather a ticklish recollection for John just then, for he was within an ace of breaking out into a loud guffaw. Restraining himself, however, just in time, by a great effort, he glided downstairs, hauling Smike behind him; and placing himself close to the parlor door, to confront the first per-

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son that might come out, signed to him to make off.

Having got so far, Smike needed no second bidding. Opening the house-door gently, and casting a look of mingled gratitude and terror at his deliverer, he took the direction which had been indicated to him, and sped away like the wind.

The Yorkshireman remained on his post for a few minutes, but, finding that there was no pause in the conversation inside, crept back again unheard, and stood, listening over the stair-rail, for a full hour. Everything remaining perfectly quiet, he got into Mr. Squeers's bed, once more, and drawing the clothes over his head, laughed till he was nearly smothered.

If there could only have been somebody by, to see how the bedclothes shook, and to see the Yorkshireman's great red face and round head appear above the sheets, every now and then, like some jovial monster coming to the surface to breathe, and once more dive down convulsed with the laughter which came bursting forth afresh — that somebody would have been scarcely less amused than John Browdie himself.

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CHAPTER XIX.

IN WHICH NICHOLAS FALLS IN LOVE. — HE EMPLOYS A MEDIATOR, WHOSE PROCEEDINGS ARE CROWNED WITH UNEXPECTED SUCCESS, EXCEPTING IN ONE SOLITARY PARTICULAR.

Once more out of the clutches of his old persecutor, it needed no fresh stimulation to call forth the utmost energy and exertion that Smike was capable of summoning to his aid. Without pausing for a moment to reflect upon the course he was taking, or the probability of its leading him homewards or the reverse, he fled away with surprising swiftness and constancy of purpose, borne upon such wings as only Fear can wear, and impelled by imaginary shouts in the well-remembered voice of Squeers, who, with a host of pursuers, seemed to the poor fellow's disordered senses to press hard upon his track; now left at a greater distance in the rear, and now gaining faster and faster upon him, as the alternations of hope and terror agitated him by turns. Long after he had become assured that these sounds were but the creation of his excited brain, he still held on, at a pace which even weakness and exhaustion could scarcely retard. It was not until the darkness and quiet of a country road

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recalled him to a sense of external objects, and the starry sky, above, warned him of the rapid flight of time, that, covered with dust and panting for breath, he stopped to listen and look about him.

All was still and silent. A glare of light in the distance, casting a warm glow upon the sky, marked where the huge city lay. Solitary fields, divided by hedges and ditches, through many of which he had crashed and scrambled in his flight, skirted the road, both by the way he had come and upon the opposite side. It was late now. They could scarcely trace him by such paths as he had taken, and if he could hope to regain his own dwelling, it must surely be at such a time as that, and under cover of the darkness. This, by degrees, became pretty plain, even to the mind of Smike. He had, at first, entertained some vague and childish idea of travelling into the country for ten or a dozen miles, and then returning homewards by a wide circuit, which should keep him clear of London — so great was his apprehension of traversing the streets alone, lest he should again encounter his dreaded enemy — but, yielding to the conviction which these thoughts inspired, he turned back, and taking the open road, though not without many fears and misgivings, made for London again, with scarcely less speed of foot than that with which he had left the temporary abode of Mr. Squeers.

By the time he re-entered it, at the western extremity, the greater part of the shops were closed. Of the throngs of people who had been tempted abroad after the heat of the day, but few remained in the streets, and they were lounging home. But of these he asked his way from time to time, and

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by dint of repeated inquiries, he at length reached the dwelling of Newman Noggs.

All that evening Newman had been hunting and searching in by-ways and corners for the very person who now knocked at his door, while Nicholas had been pursuing the same inquiry in other directions. He was sitting with a melancholy air at his poor supper, when Smike's timorous and uncertain knock reached his ears. Alive to every sound, in his anxious and expectant state, Newman hurried downstairs, and, uttering a cry of joyful surprise, dragged the welcome visitor into the passage and up the stairs, and said not a word until he had him safe in his own garret and the door was shut behind them, when he mixed a great mugful of gin and water, and holding it to Smike's mouth, as one might hold a bowl of medicine to the lips of a refractory child, commanded him to drain it to the last drop.

Newman looked uncommonly blank when he found that Smike did little more than put his lips to the precious mixture; he was in the act of raising the mug to his own mouth with a deep sigh of compassion for his poor friend's weakness, when Smike, beginning to relate the adventures which had befallen him, arrested him half-way, and he stood listening, with the mug in his hand.

It was odd enough to see the change that came over Newman as Smike proceeded. At first he stood rubbing his lips with the back of his hand, as a preparatory ceremony towards composing himself for a draught; then, at the mention of Squeers, he took the mug under his arm, and opening his eyes very wide, looked on in the utmost astonishment. When Smike came to the assault upon himself in

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the hackney coach, he hastily deposited the mug upon the table, and limped up and down the room in a state of the greatest excitement, stopping himself with a jerk every now and then, as if to listen more attentively. When John Browdie came to be spoken of, he dropped by slow and gradual degrees into a chair, and rubbing his hands upon his knees — quicker and quicker as the story reached its climax — burst, at last, into a laugh composed of one loud sonorous "Ha! ha!" having given vent to which, his countenance immediately fell again as he inquired, with the utmost anxiety, whether it was probable that John Browdie and Squeers had come to blows.

"No! I think not," replied Smike. "I don't think he could have missed me till I had got quite away."

Newman scratched his head with a show of great disappointment, and once more lifting up the mug, applied himself to the contents; smiling meanwhile, over the rim, with a grim and ghastly smile at Smike.

"You shall stay here," said Newman; "you're tired — fagged. I'll tell them you're come back. They have been half mad about you. Mr. Nicholas —"

"God bless him!" cried Smike.

"Amen!" returned Newman. "He hasn't had a minute's rest or peace; no more has the old lady, nor Miss Nickleby."

"No, no. Has *she* thought about me?" said Smike. "Has she, though? oh, has she — has she? Don't tell me so if she has not."

"She has," cried Newman. "She is as noble-hearted as she is beautiful."

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"Yes, yes!" cried Smike. "Well said!"

"So mild and gentle," said Newman.

"Yes, yes!" cried Smike, with increasing eagerness.

"And yet with such a true and gallant spirit," pursued Newman.

He was going on, in his enthusiasm, when, chancing to look at his companion, he saw that he had covered his face with his hands, and that tears were stealing out between his fingers.

A moment before, the boy's eyes were sparkling with unwonted fire, and every feature had been lighted up with an excitement which made him appear, for the moment, quite a different being.

"Well, well," muttered Newman, as if he were a little puzzled. "It has touched *me*, more than once, to think such a nature should have been exposed to such trials; this poor fellow — yes, yes, — he feels that too — it softens him — makes him think of his former misery. Hah! That's it? Yes, that's — hum!"

It was by no means clear, from the tone of these broken reflections, that Newman Noggs considered them as explaining, at all satisfactorily, the emotion which had suggested them. He sat, in a musing attitude, for some time, regarding Smike occasionally with an anxious and doubtful glance, which sufficiently showed that he was not very remotely connected with his thoughts.

At length he repeated his proposition that Smike should remain where he was for that night, and that he (Noggs) should straightway repair to the cottage to relieve the suspense of the family. But, as Smike would not hear of this — pleading his anxi-

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ety to see his friends again — they eventually sallied forth together; and the night being by this time far advanced, and Smike being, besides, so footsore that he could hardly crawl along, it was within an hour of sunrise when they reached their destination.

At the first sound of their voices outside the house, Nicholas, who had passed a sleepless night, devising schemes for the recovery of his lost charge, started from his bed, and joyfully admitted them. There was so much noisy conversation, and congratulation, and indignation, that the remainder of the family were soon awakened, and Smike received a warm and cordial welcome, not only from Kate, but from Mrs. Nickleby also, who assured him of her future favor and regard, and was so obliging as to relate for his entertainment and that of the assembled circle a most remarkable account extracted from some work, the name of which she had never known, of a miraculous escape from some prison, but what one she couldn't remember, effected by an officer whose name she had forgotten, confined for some crime which she didn't clearly recollect.

At first Nicholas was disposed to give his uncle credit for some portion of this bold attempt (which had so nearly proved successful) to carry off Smike; but on more mature consideration he was inclined to think that the full merit of it rested with Mr. Squeers. Determined to ascertain, if he could, through John Browdie, how the case really stood, he betook himself to his daily occupation: meditating as he went on a great variety of schemes for the punishment of the Yorkshire schoolmaster, all of which had their foundation in the strictest princi-

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ples of retributive justice, and had but the one drawback of being wholly impracticable.

"A fine morning, Mr. Linkinwater!" said Nicholas, entering the office.

"Ah!" replied Tim, "talk of the country, indeed! What do you think of this, now, for a day — a London day — eh?"

"It's a little clearer out of town," said Nicholas.

"Clearer!" echoed Tim Linkinwater. "You should see it from my bedroom window."

"You should see it from *mine*," replied Nicholas, with a smile.

"Pooh! pooh!" said Tim Linkinwater, "don't tell me. Country!" (Bow was quite a rustic place to Tim.) "Nonsense! What can you get in the country but new-laid eggs and flowers? I can buy new-laid eggs in Leadenhall Market, any morning before breakfast; and as to flowers, it's worth a run upstairs to smell my mignonnette, or to see the double wallflower in the back-attic window, at No. 6, in the court."

"There is a double wallflower at No. 6, in the court, is there?" said Nicholas.

"Yes, is there!" replied Tim, "and planted in a cracked jug, without a spout. There were hyacinths there, this last spring, blossoming in — But you'll laugh at that, of course."

"At what?"

"At their blossoming in old blacking-bottles," said Tim.

"Not I, indeed," returned Nicholas.

Tim looked wistfully at him, for a moment, as if he were encouraged by the tone of this reply to be more communicative on the subject; and sticking

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behind his ear a pen that he had been making, and shutting up his knife with a smart click, said, —

"They belong to a sickly, bedridden, hump-backed boy, and seem to be the only pleasure, Mr. Nickleby, of his sad existence. How many years is it," said Tim, pondering, "since I first noticed him, quite a little child, dragging himself about on a pair of tiny crutches? Well! Well! Not many; but though they would appear nothing, if I thought of other things, they seem a long, long time, when I think of him. It is a sad thing," said Tim, breaking off, "to see a little deformed child sitting apart from other children, who are active and merry, watching the games he is denied the power to share in. He made my heart ache very often."

"It is a good heart," said Nicholas, "that disentangles itself from the close avocations of every day, to heed such things. You were saying —"

"That the flowers belonged to this poor boy," said Tim; "that's all. When it is fine weather, and he can crawl out of bed, he draws a chair close to the window, and sits there, looking at them and arranging them, all day long. We used to nod, at first, and then we came to speak. Formerly, when I called to him of a morning, and asked him how he was, he would smile, and say, 'Better;' but now he shakes his head, and only bends more closely over his old plants. It must be dull to watch the dark housetops and the flying clouds, for so many months; but he is very patient."

"Is there nobody in the house to cheer or help him?" asked Nicholas.

"His father lives there, I believe," replied Tim, "and other people too; but no one seems to care

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much for the poor sickly cripple. I have asked him, very often, if I can do nothing for him; his answer is always the same,—'Nothing.' His voice is growing weak of late, but I can *see* that he makes the old reply. He can't leave his bed now, so they have moved it close beside the window, and there he lies, all day: now looking at the sky, and now at his flowers, which he still makes shift to trim and water, with his own thin hands. At night, when he sees my candle, he draws back his curtain, and leaves it so, till I am in bed. It seems such company to him to know that I am there, that I often sit at my window for an hour or more, that he may see I am still awake; and sometimes I get up in the night to look at the dull melancholy light in his little room, and wonder whether he is awake or sleeping.

"The night will not be long coming," said Tim, "when he will sleep, and never wake again on earth. We have never so much as shaken hands in all our lives; and yet I shall miss him like an old friend. Are there any country flowers that could interest me like these, do you think? Or do you suppose that the withering of a hundred kinds of the choicest flowers that blow, called by the hardest Latin names that were ever invented, would give me one fraction of the pain that I shall feel when these old jugs and bottles are swept away as lumber? Country!" cried Tim, with a contemptuous emphasis; "don't you know that I couldn't have such a court under my bedroom window, anywhere, but in London?"

With which inquiry, Tim turned his back, and pretending to be absorbed in his accounts, took an

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opportunity of hastily wiping his eyes when he supposed Nicholas was looking another way.

Whether it was that Tim's accounts were more than usually intricate that morning, or whether it was that his habitual serenity had been a little disturbed by these recollections, it so happened that when Nicholas returned from executing some commission, and inquired whether Mr. Charles Cheeryble was alone in his room, Tim promptly, and without the smallest hesitation, replied in the affirmative, although somebody had passed into the room not ten minutes before, and Tim took especial and particular pride in preventing any intrusion on either of the brothers when they were engaged with any visitor whatever.

"I'll take this letter to him at once," said Nicholas, "if that's the case." And with that he walked to the room and knocked at the door.

No answer.

Another knock, and still no answer.

"He can't be here," thought Nicholas. "I'll lay it on his table."

So, Nicholas opened the door and walked in; and very quickly he turned to walk out again, when he saw, to his great astonishment and discomfiture, a young lady upon her knees at Mr. Cheeryble's feet, and Mr. Cheeryble beseeching her to rise, and entreating a third person, who had the appearance of the young lady's female attendant, to add her persuasions to his to induce her to do so.

Nicholas stammered out an awkward apology, and was precipitately retiring, when the young lady, turning her head a little, presented to his view the features of the lovely girl whom he had seen at the

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Nicholas recognizes the Young Lady unknown.

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register-office on his first visit long before. Glancing from her to the attendant, he recognized the same clumsy servant who had accompanied her then; and between his admiration of the young lady's beauty, and the confusion and surprise of this unexpected recognition, he stood stock-still, in such a bewildered state of surprise and embarrassment that, for the moment, he was quite bereft of the power either to speak or move.

"My dear ma'am — my dear young lady," cried brother Charles in violent agitation, "pray don't — not another word, I beseech and entreat you! I implore you — I beg of you — to rise. We — we — are not alone."

As he spoke, he raised the young lady, who staggered to a chair and swooned away.

"She has fainted, sir," said Nicholas, darting eagerly forward.

"Poor dear, poor dear!" cried brother Charles. "Where is my brother Ned? Ned, my dear brother, come here, pray."

"Brother Charles, my dear fellow," replied his brother, hurrying into the room, "what is the — ah! what —"

"Hush! hush! — not a word for your life, brother Ned," returned the other. "Ring for the housekeeper, my dear brother — call Tim Linkinwater! Here, Tim Linkinwater, sir — Mr. Nickleby, my dear sir, leave the room, I beg and beseech of you."

"I think she is better now," said Nicholas, who had been watching the patient so eagerly, that he had not heard the request.

"Poor bird!" cried brother Charles, gently taking her hand in his, and laying her head upon his

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arm. "Brother Ned, my dear fellow, you will be surprised, I know, to witness this, in business hours; but —" Here he was again reminded of the presence of Nicholas, and shaking him by the hand, earnestly requested him to leave the room, and to send Tim Linkinwater without an instant's delay.

Nicholas immediately withdrew, and, on his way to the counting-house, met both the old housekeeper and Tim Linkinwater, jostling each other in the passage, and hurrying to the scene of action with extraordinary speed. Without waiting to hear his message, Tim Linkinwater darted into the room, and presently afterwards Nicholas heard the door shut and locked on the inside.

He had abundance of time to ruminate on this discovery, for Tim Linkinwater was absent during the greater part of an hour, during the whole of which time Nicholas thought of nothing but the young lady, and her exceeding beauty, and what could possibly have brought her there, and why they made such a mystery of it. The more he thought of all this, the more it perplexed him, and the more anxious he became to know who and what she was. "I should have known her among ten thousand," thought Nicholas. And with that he walked up and down the room, and recalling her face and figure (of which he had a peculiarly vivid remembrance), discarded all other subjects of reflection and dwelt upon that alone.

At length Tim Linkinwater came back — provokingly cool, and with papers in his hand, and a pen in his mouth, as if nothing had happened.

"Is she quite recovered?" said Nicholas impetuously.

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"Who?" returned Tim Linkinwater.

"Who!" repeated Nicholas. "The young lady."

"What do you make, Mr. Nickleby," said Tim, taking his pen out of his mouth, "what do you make of four hundred and twenty-seven times three thousand two hundred and thirty-eight?"

"Nay," returned Nicholas, "what do you make of my question first? I asked you —"

"About the young lady," said Tim Linkinwater, putting on his spectacles. "To be sure. Yes. Oh! she's very well."

"Very well, is she?" returned Nicholas.

"*Very* well," replied Mr. Linkinwater gravely.

"Will she be able to go home to-day?" asked Nicholas.

"She's gone," said Tim.

"Gone!"

"Yes."

"I hope she has not far to go?" said Nicholas, looking earnestly at the other.

"Ay," replied the immovable Tim, "I hope she hasn't."

Nicholas hazarded one or two further remarks, but it was evident that Tim Linkinwater had his own reasons for evading the subject, and that he was determined to afford no further information respecting the fair unknown, who had awakened so much curiosity in the breast of his young friend. Nothing daunted by this repulse, Nicholas returned to the charge next day, emboldened by the circumstance of Mr. Linkinwater being in a very talkative and communicative mood; but, directly he resumed the theme, Tim relapsed into a state of most provoking taciturnity, and from answering in mono-

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syllables, came to returning no answers at all, save such as were to be inferred from several grave nods and shrugs, which only served to whet that appe tite for intelligence in Nicholas, which had already attained a most unreasonable height.

Foiled in these attempts, he was fain to content himself with watching for the young lady's next visit, but here again he was disappointed. Day after day passed, and she did not return. He looked eagerly at the superscription of all the notes and letters, but there was not one among them which he could fancy to be in her handwriting. On two or three occasions he was employed on business which took him to a distance, and had formerly been transacted by Tim Linkinwater. Nicholas could not help suspecting that, for some reason or other, he was sent out of the way on purpose, and that the young lady was there in his absence. Nothing transpired, however, to confirm this suspicion, and Tim could not be entrapped into any confession or admission tending to support it in the smallest degree.

Mystery and disappointment are not absolutely indispensable to the growth of love, but they are, very often, its powerful auxiliaries. "Out of sight, out of mind," is well enough as a proverb applicable to cases of friendship, though absence is not always necessary to hollowness of heart, even between friends, and truth and honesty, like precious stones, are perhaps most easily imitated at a distance, when the counterfeits often pass for real. Love, however, is very materially assisted by a warm and active imagination: which has a long memory, and will thrive, for a considerable time, on very slight and

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sparing food. Thus it is, that it often attains its most luxuriant growth in separation and under circumstances of the utmost difficulty; and thus it was, that Nicholas, thinking of nothing but the unknown young lady, from day to day and from hour to hour, began, at last, to think that he was very desperately in love with her, and that never was such an ill-used and persecuted lover as he.

Still, though he loved and languished after the most orthodox models, and was only deterred from making a confidante of Kate by the slight considerations of having never, in all his life, spoken to the object of his passion, and having never set eyes upon her, except on two occasions, on both of which she had come and gone like a flash of lightning — or, as Nicholas himself said, in the numerous conversations he held with himself, like a vision of youth and beauty much too bright to last — his ardor and devotion remained without its reward. The young lady appeared no more; so there was a great deal of love wasted (enough indeed to have set up half a dozen young gentlemen, as times go, with the utmost decency), and nobody was a bit the wiser for it; not even Nicholas himself, who, on the contrary, became more dull, sentimental, and lackadaisical, every day.

While matters were in this state, the failure of a correspondent of the brothers Cheeryble, in Germany, imposed upon Tim Linkinwater and Nicholas the necessity of going through some very long and complicated accounts, extending over a considerable space of time. To get through them with the greater despatch, Tim Linkinwater proposed that they should remain at the counting-house, for a

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week or so, until ten o'clock at night; to this, as nothing damped the zeal of Nicholas in the service of his kind patrons — not even romance, which has seldom business habits — he cheerfully assented. On the very first night of these later hours, at nine exactly, there came: not the young lady herself, but her servant, who, being closeted with brother Charles for some time, went away, and returned next night at the same hour, and on the next, and on the next again.

These repeated visits inflamed the curiosity of Nicholas to the very highest pitch. Tantalized and excited, beyond all bearing, and unable to fathom the mystery without neglecting his duty, he confided the whole secret to Newman Noggs, imploring him to be on the watch next night; to follow the girl home; to set on foot such inquiries relative to the name, condition, and history of her mistress, as he could, without exciting suspicion; and to report the result to him with the least possible delay.

Beyond all measure proud of this commission, Newman Noggs took up his post, in the square, on the following evening, a full hour before the needful time, and planting himself behind the pump and pulling his hat over his eyes, began his watch with an elaborate appearance of mystery, admirably calculated to excite the suspicion of all beholders. Indeed, divers servant girls who came to draw water, and sundry little boys who stopped to drink at the ladle, were almost scared out of their senses, by the apparition of Newman Noggs looking stealthily round the pump, with nothing of him visible but his face, and that wearing the expression of a meditative Ogre.

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Punctual to her time, the messenger came again, and, after an interview of rather longer duration than usual, departed. Newman had made two appointments with Nicholas: one for the next evening, conditional on his success: and one the next night following, which was to be kept under all circumstances. The first night he was not at the place of meeting (a certain tavern about half-way between the City and Golden Square), but on the second night he was there before Nicholas, and received him with open arms.

"It's all right," whispered Newman. "Sit down — sit down, there's a dear young man, and let me tell you all about it."

Nicholas needed no second invitation, and eagerly inquired what was the news.

"There's a great deal of news," said Newman, in a flutter of exultation. "It's all right. Don't be anxious. I don't know where to begin. Never mind that. Keep up your spirits. It's all right."

"Well?" said Nicholas eagerly. "Yes?"

"Yes," replied Newman. "That's it."

"What's it?" said Nicholas. "The name — the name, my dear fellow!"

"The name's Bobster," replied Newman.

"Bobster!" repeated Nicholas indignantly.

"That's the name," said Newman. "I remember it by lobster."

"Bobster!" repeated Nicholas, more emphatically than before. "That must be the servant's name."

"No, it ain't," said Newman, shaking his head with great positiveness. "Miss Cecilia Bobster."

"Cecilia, eh?" returned Nicholas, muttering the two names together over and over again in every

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variety of tone, to try the effect. "Well, Cecilia is a pretty name."

"Very. And a pretty creature too," said Newman.

"Who?" said Nicholas.

"Miss Bobster."

"Why, where have you seen her?" demanded Nicholas.

"Never mind, my dear boy," retorted Noggs, clapping him on the shoulder. "I *have* seen her. You shall see her. I've managed it all."

"My dear Newman," cried Nicholas, grasping his hand, "are you serious?"

"I am," replied Newman. "I mean it all. Every word. You shall see her to-morrow night. She consents to hear you speak for yourself. I persuaded her. She is all affability, goodness, sweetness, and beauty."

"I know she is; I know she must be, Newman!" said Nicholas, wringing his hand.

"You are right," returned Newman.

"Where does she live?" cried Nicholas. "What have you learned of her history? Has she a father — mother — any brothers — sisters? What did she say? How came you to see her? Was she not very much surprised? Did you say how passionately I have longed to speak to her? Did you tell her where I had seen her? Did you tell her how, and when, and where, and how long, and how often, I have thought of that sweet face which came upon me in my bitterest distress like a glimpse of some better world — did you, Newman — did you?"

Poor Noggs literally gasped for breath as this flood of questions rushed upon him, and moved

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spasmodically in his chair at every fresh inquiry, staring at Nicholas meanwhile with a most ludicrous expression of perplexity.

"No," said Newman, "I didn't tell her that."

"Didn't tell her which?" asked Nicholas.

"About the glimpse of the better world," said Newman. "I didn't tell her who you were, either, or where you'd seen her. I said you loved her to distraction."

"That's true, Newman," replied Nicholas, with his characteristic vehemence. "Heaven knows I do!"

"I said, too, that you had admired her for a long time in secret," said Newman.

"Yes, yes. What did she say to that?" asked Nicholas.

"Blushed," said Newman.

"To be sure. Of course she would," said Nicholas approvingly.

Newman then went on to say, that the young lady was an only child, that her mother was dead, that she resided with her father, and that she had been induced to allow her lover a secret interview, at the intercession of her servant, who had great influence with her. He further related how it required much moving and great eloquence to bring the young lady to this pass; how it was expressly understood that she merely afforded Nicholas an opportunity of declaring his passion; and how she by no means pledged herself to be favorably impressed with his attentions. The mystery of her visits to the brothers Cheeryble remained wholly unexplained, for Newman had not alluded to them, either in his preliminary conversations with the servant or his sub-

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sequent interview with the mistress, merely remarking that he had been instructed to watch the girl home and plead his young friend's cause, and not saying how far he had followed her, or from what point. But Newman hinted that from what had fallen from the confidante, he had been led to suspect that the young lady led a very miserable and unhappy life, under the strict control of her only parent, who was of a violent and brutal temper —a circumstance which he thought might in some degree account, both for her having sought the protection and friendship of the brothers, and her suffering herself to be prevailed upon to grant the promised interview. The last he held to be a very logical deduction from the premises, inasmuch as it was but natural to suppose that a young lady, whose present condition was so unenviable, would be more than commonly desirous to change it.

It appeared, on further questioning — for it was only by a very long and arduous process that all this could be got out of Newman Noggs — that Newman, in explanation of his shabby appearance, had represented himself as being, for certain wise and indispensable purposes connected with that intrigue, in disguise; and, being questioned how he had come to exceed his commission so far as to procure an interview, he responded, that the lady appearing willing to grant it, he considered himself bound, both in duty and gallantry, to avail himself of such a golden means of enabling Nicholas to prosecute his addresses. After these and all possible questions had been asked and answered twenty times over, they parted, undertaking to meet on the following night at half-past ten, for the purpose of

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fulfilling the appointment; which was for eleven o'clock.

"Things come about very strangely!" thought Nicholas, as he walked home. "I never contemplated anything of this kind; never dreamed of the possibility of it. To know something of the life of one in whom I felt such interest; to see her in the street, to pass the house in which she lived, to meet her sometimes in her walks, to hope that a day might come when I might be in a condition to tell her of my love, this was the utmost extent of my thoughts. Now, however— But I should be a fool, indeed, to repine at my own good-fortune!"

Still, Nicholas was dissatisfied; and there was more in the dissatisfaction than mere revulsion of feeling. He was angry with the young lady for being so easily won, "because," reasoned Nicholas, "it is not as if she knew it was I, but it might have been anybody," — which was certainly not pleasant. The next moment, he was angry with himself for entertaining such thoughts, arguing that nothing but goodness could dwell in such a temple, and that the behavior of the brothers sufficiently showed the estimation in which they held her. "The fact is, she's a mystery altogether," said Nicholas. This was not more satisfactory than his previous course of reflection, and only drove him out upon a new sea of speculation and conjecture, where he tossed and tumbled, in great discomfort of mind, until the clock struck ten, and the hour of meeting drew nigh.

Nicholas had dressed himself with great care, and even Newman Noggs had trimmed himself up a little; his coat presenting the phenomenon of two

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consecutive buttons, and the supplementary pins being inserted at tolerably regular intervals. He wore his hat, too, in the newest taste, with a pocket-handkerchief in the crown, and a twisted end of it straggling out behind after the fashion of a pigtail, though he could scarcely lay claim to the ingenuity of inventing this latter decoration, inasmuch as he was utterly unconscious of it: being in a nervous and excited condition which rendered him quite insensible to everything but the great object of the expedition.

They traversed the streets in profound silence; and after walking at a round pace for some distance, arrived in one, of a gloomy appearance and very little frequented, near the Edgeware Road.

"Number twelve," said Newman.

"Oh!" replied Nicholas, looking about him.

"Good street?" said Newman.

"Yes," returned Nicholas. "Rather dull."

Newman made no answer to this remark, but, halting abruptly, planted Nicholas with his back to some area railings, and gave him to understand that he was to wait there, without moving hand or foot, until it was satisfactorily ascertained that the coast was clear. This done, Noggs limped away with great alacrity; looking over his shoulder every instant, to make quite certain that Nicholas was obeying his directions; and, ascending the steps of a house some half-dozen doors off, was lost to view.

After a short delay, he reappeared, and limping back again, halted midway, and beckoned Nicholas to follow him.

"Well?" said Nicholas, advancing towards him on tiptoe.

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"All right," replied Newman, in high glee. "All ready; nobody at home. Couldn't be better. Ha, ha!"

With this fortifying assurance, he stole past a street-door, on which Nicholas caught a glimpse of a brass plate, with "BOBSTER," in very large letters; and, stopping at the area gate, which was open, signed to his young friend to descend.

"What the devil!" cried Nicholas, drawing back. "Are we to sneak into the kitchen, as if we came after the forks?"

"Hush!" replied Newman. "Old Bobster—ferocious Turk. He'd kill 'em all—box the young lady's ears—he does—often."

"What!" cried Nicholas, in high wrath, "do you mean to tell me that any man would dare to box the ears of such a—"

He had no time to sing the praises of his mistress, just then, for Newman gave him a gentle push which had nearly precipitated him to the bottom of the area steps. Thinking it best to take the hint in good part, Nicholas descended, without further remonstrance, but with a countenance bespeaking anything rather than the hope and rapture of a passionate lover. Newman followed—he would have followed head first, but for the timely assistance of Nicholas—and, taking his hand, led him through a stone passage, profoundly dark, into a back-kitchen or cellar, of the blackest and most pitchy obscurity, where they stopped.

"Well!" said Nicholas, in a discontented whisper, "this is not all, I suppose, is it?"

"No, no," rejoined Noggs; "they'll be here directly. It's all right."

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"I am glad to hear it," said Nicholas. "I shouldn't have thought it, I confess."

They exchanged no further words, and there Nicholas stood, listening to the loud breathing of Newman Noggs, and imagining that his nose seemed to glow like a red-hot coal, even in the midst of the darkness which enshrouded them. Suddenly the sound of cautious footsteps attracted his ear, and directly afterwards a female voice inquired if the gentleman was there.

"Yes," replied Nicholas, turning towards the corner from which the voice proceeded. "Who is that?"

"Only me, sir," replied the voice. "Now if you please, ma'am."

A gleam of light shone into the place, and presently the servant girl appeared, bearing a light, and followed by her young mistress, who seemed to be overwhelmed by modesty and confusion.

At sight of the young lady, Nicholas started and changed color; his heart beat violently, and he stood rooted to the spot. At that instant, and almost simultaneously with her arrival and that of the candle, there was heard a loud and furious knocking at the street-door, which caused Newman Noggs to jump up, with great agility, from a beer-barrel on which he had been seated astride, and to exclaim abruptly, and with a face of ashy paleness, "Bobster, by the Lord!"

The young lady shrieked, the attendant wrung her hands, Nicholas gazed from one to the other in apparent stupefaction, and Newman hurried to and fro, thrusting his hands into all his pockets successively, and drawing out the linings of every one in

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the excess of his irresolution. It was but a moment, but the confusion crowded into that one moment no imagination can exaggerate.

"Leave the house, for Heaven's sake! We have done wrong — we deserve it all," cried the young lady. "Leave the house, or I am ruined and undone forever."

"Will you hear me say but one word?" cried Nicholas. "Only one. I will not detain you. Will you hear me say one word, in explanation of this mischance?"

But Nicholas might as well have spoken to the wind, for the young lady, with distracted looks, hurried up the stairs. He would have followed her, but Newman, twisting his hand in his coat collar, dragged him towards the passage by which they had entered.

"Let me go, Newman, in the Devil's name!" cried Nicholas. "I must speak to her — I will! I will not leave this house without."

"Reputation — character — violence — consider," said Newman, clinging round him with both arms, and hurrying him away. "Let them open the door. We'll go as we came, directly it's shut. Come. This way. Here."

Overpowered by the remonstrances of Newman, and the tears and prayers of the girl, and the tremendous knocking above, which had never ceased, Nicholas allowed himself to be hurried off; and, precisely as Mr. Bobster made his entrance by the street-door, he and Noggs made their exit by the area gate.

They hurried away, through several streets, without stopping or speaking. At last, they halted

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and confronted each other with blank and rueful faces.

"Never mind," said Newman, gasping for breath. "Don't be cast down. It's all right. More fortunate next time. It couldn't be helped. I did *my* part."

"Excellently," replied Nicholas, taking his hand. "Excellently, and like the true and zealous friend you are. Only — mind, I am not disappointed, Newman, and feel just as much indebted to you — only *it was the wrong lady*."

"Eh?" cried Newman Noggs. "Taken in by the servant?"

"Newman, Newman," said Nicholas, laying his hand upon his shoulder: "it was the wrong servant too."

Newman's under-jaw dropped, and he gazed at Nicholas, with his sound eye fixed fast and motionless in his head.

"Don't take it to heart," said Nicholas; "it's of no consequence; you see I don't care about it; you followed the wrong person, that's all."

That *was* all. Whether Newman Noggs had looked round the pump, in a slanting direction, so long, that his sight became impaired; or whether, finding that there was time to spare, he had recruited himself with a few drops of something stronger than the pump could yield — by whatsoever means it had come to pass, this was his mistake. And Nicholas went home to brood upon it, and to meditate upon the charms of the unknown young lady, now as far beyond his reach as ever.

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CHAPTER XX.

CONTAINING SOME ROMANTIC PASSAGES BETWEEN MRS. NICKLEBY AND THE GENTLEMAN IN THE SMALL-CLOTHES NEXT DOOR.

Ever since her last momentous conversation with her son, Mrs. Nickleby had begun to display unusual care in the adornment of her person, gradually superadding to those staid and matronly habiliments, which had, up to that time, formed her ordinary attire, a variety of embellishments and decorations, slight perhaps in themselves, but, taken together, and considered with reference to the subject of her disclosure, of no mean importance. Even her black dress assumed something of a deadly-lively air from the jaunty style in which it was worn; and, eked out as its lingering attractions were, by a prudent disposal, here and there, of certain juvenile ornaments of little or no value, which had, for that reason alone, escaped the general wreck and been permitted to slumber peacefully in odd corners of old drawers and boxes where daylight seldom shone, her mourning garments assumed quite a new character. From being the outward tokens of respect and sorrow for the dead, they became converted into signals of very slaughterous and killing designs upon the living.

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Mrs. Nickleby might have been stimulated to this proceeding by a lofty sense of duty, and impulses of unquestionable excellence. She might, by this time, have become impressed with the sinfulness of long indulgence in unavailing woe, or the necessity of setting a proper example of neatness and decorum to her blooming daughter. Considerations of duty and responsibility apart, the change might have taken its rise in feelings of the purest and most disinterested charity. The gentleman next door had been vilified by Nicholas; rudely stigmatized as a dotard and an idiot; and for these attacks upon his understanding, Mrs. Nickleby was, in some sort, accountable. She might have felt that it was the act of a good Christian to show, by all means in her power, that the abused gentleman was neither the one nor the other. And what better means could she adopt, towards so virtuous and laudable an end, than proving to all men, in her own person, that his passion was the most rational and reasonable in the world, and just the very result of all others, which discreet and thinking persons might have foreseen, from her incautiously displaying her matured charms, without reserve, under the very eye, as it were, of an ardent and too susceptible man?

"Ah!" said Mrs. Nickleby, gravely shaking her head; "if Nicholas knew what his poor dear papa suffered before we were engaged, when I used to hate him, he would have a little more feeling. Shall I ever forget the morning I looked scornfully at him when he offered to carry my parasol? Or that night when I frowned at him? It was a mercy he didn't emigrate. It very nearly drove him to it."

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Whether the deceased might not have been better off if he had emigrated in his bachelor days, was a question which his relict did not stop to consider; for Kate entered the room, with her workbox, in this stage of her reflections; and a much slighter interruption, or no interruption at all, would have diverted Mrs. Nickleby's thoughts into a new channel at any time.

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby; "I don't know how it is, but a fine warm summer day like this, with the birds singing in every direction, always puts me in mind of roast pig, with sage and onion sauce, and made gravy."

"That's a curious association of ideas, is it not, mamma?"

"Upon my word, my dear, I don't know," replied Mrs. Nickleby. "Roast pig — let me see. On the day five weeks after you were christened, we had a roast — no, that couldn't have been a pig, either, because I recollect there were a pair of them to carve, and your poor papa and I could never have thought of sitting down to two pigs — they must have been partridges. Roast pig! I hardly think we ever could have had one, now I come to remember, for your papa could never bear the sight of them in the shops, and used to say that they always put him in mind of very little babies, only the pigs had much fairer complexions; and he had a horror of little babies, too, because he couldn't very well afford any increase to his family, and had a natural dislike to the subject. It's very odd now, what can have put that in my head! I recollect dining once at Mrs. Bevan's, in that broad street round the corner by the coachmaker's, where the tipsy man

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fell through the cellar-flap of an empty house nearly a week before the quarter-day, and wasn't found till the new tenant went in — and we had roast pig there. It must be that, I think, that reminds me of it, especially as there was a little bird in the room that would keep on singing all the time of dinner — at least, not a little bird, for it was a parrot, and he didn't sing exactly, for he talked and swore dreadfully: but I think it must be that. Indeed I am sure it must. Shouldn't you say so, my dear?"

"I should say there was not a doubt about it, mamma," returned Kate, with a cheerful smile.

"No; but *do* you think so, Kate?" said Mrs. Nickleby, with as much gravity as if it were a question of the most imminent and thrilling interest. "If you don't, say so at once, you know; because it's just as well to be correct, particularly on a point of this kind, which is very curious and worth settling while one thinks about it."

Kate laughingly replied that she was quite convinced; and as her mamma still appeared undetermined whether it was not absolutely essential that the subject should be renewed, proposed that they should take their work into the summer-house, and enjoy the beauty of the afternoon. Mrs. Nickleby readily assented, and to the summer-house they repaired, without further discussion.

"Well, I will say," observed Mrs. Nickleby, as she took her seat, "that there never was such a good creature as Smike. Upon my word, the pains he has taken in putting this little arbor to rights, and training the sweetest flowers about it, are beyond anything I could have — I wish he wouldn't

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put *all* the gravel on your side, Kate my dear, though, and leave nothing but mould for me."

"Dear mamma," returned Kate hastily, "take this seat — do — to oblige me, mamma."

"No, indeed, my dear. I shall keep my own side," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Well! I declare!"

Kate looked up inquiringly.

"If he hasn't been," said Mrs. Nickleby, "and got, from somewhere or other, a couple of roots of those flowers that I said I was so fond of, the other night, and asked you if you were not — no, that *you* said *you* were so fond of, the other night, and asked me if I wasn't — it's the same thing. Now, upon my word, I take that as very kind and attentive indeed! I don't see," added Mrs. Nickleby, looking narrowly about her, "any of them on my side, but I suppose they grow best near the gravel. You may depend upon it they do, Kate, and that's the reason they are all near you, and he has put the gravel there, because it's the sunny side. Upon my word, that's very clever now! I shouldn't have had half as much thought myself!"

"Mamma," said Kate, bending over her work so that her face was almost hidden, "before you were married —"

"Dear me, Kate," interrupted Mrs. Nickleby, "what in the name of goodness graciousness makes you fly off to the time before I was married, when I'm talking to you about his thoughtfulness and attention to me? You don't seem to take the smallest interest in the garden."

"Oh! mamma," said Kate, raising her face again, "you know I do."

"Well, then, my dear, why don't you praise the

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neatness and prettiness with which it's kept?" said Mrs. Nickleby. "How very odd you are, Kate!"

"I do praise it, mamma," answered Kate gently. "Poor fellow!"

"I scarcely ever hear you, my dear," retorted Mrs. Nickleby; "that's all I've got to say." By this time the good lady had been a long while upon one topic, so she fell at once into her daughter's little trap — if trap it were — and inquired what she had been going to say.

"About what, mamma?" said Kate, who had apparently quite forgotten her diversion.

"Lor, Kate, my dear," returned her mother, "why, you're asleep or stupid! About the time before I was married."

"Oh, yes!" said Kate, "I remember. I was going to ask, mamma, before you were married, had you many suitors?"

"Suitors, my dear!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, with a smile of wonderful complacency. "First and last, Kate, I must have had a dozen at least."

"Mamma!" returned Kate, in a tone of remonstrance.

"I had indeed, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby; "not including your poor papa, or a young gentleman who used to go, at that time, to the same dancing school, and who *would* send gold watches and bracelets to our house in gilt-edged paper (which were always returned), and who afterwards unfortunately went out to Botany Bay in a cadet ship — a convict ship, I mean — and escaped into a bush and killed sheep (I don't know how they got there), and was going to be hung, only he accidentally choked himself, and the government pardoned him.

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Then there was young Lukin," said Mrs. Nickleby, beginning with her left thumb and checking off the names on her fingers — "Mogley — Tipslark — Cabbery — Smifser — "

Having now reached her little finger, Mrs. Nickleby was carrying the account over to the other hand, when a loud "Hem!" which appeared to come from the very foundation of the garden-wall, gave both herself and her daughter a violent start.

"Mamma! what was that?" said Kate, in a low tone of voice.

"Upon my word, my dear," returned Mrs. Nickleby, considerably startled, "unless it was the gentleman belonging to the next house, I don't know what it could possibly — "

"A—hem!" cried the same voice; and that, not in the tone of an ordinary clearing of the throat, but in a kind of bellow, which woke up all the echoes in the neighborhood, and was prolonged to an extent which must have made the unseen bellower quite black in the face.

"I understand it now, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, laying her hand on Kate's; "don't be alarmed, my love, it's not directed to you, and is not intended to frighten anybody. Let us give everybody their due, Kate; I am bound to say that."

So saying, Mrs. Nickleby nodded her head, and patted the back of her daughter's hand, a great many times, and looked as if she could tell something vastly important if she chose, but had self-denial, thank Heaven; and wouldn't do it.

"What do you mean, mamma?" demanded Kate, in evident surprise.

"Don't be flurried, my dear," replied Mrs.

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Nickleby, looking towards the garden-wall, "for you see *I*'m not, and if it would be excusable in anybody to be flurried, it certainly would — under all the circumstances — be excusable in me, but I am not, Kate — not at all."

"It seems designed to attract our attention, mamma," said Kate.

"It *is* designed to attract our attention, my dear — at least," rejoined Mrs. Nickleby, drawing herself up, and patting her daughter's hand more blandly than before, "to attract the attention of one of us. Hem! you needn't be at all uneasy, my dear."

Kate looked very much perplexed, and was apparently about to ask for further explanation, when a shouting and scuffling noise, as of an elderly gentleman whooping, and kicking up his legs on loose gravel, with great violence, was heard to proceed from the same direction as the former sounds; and before they had subsided, a large cucumber was seen to shoot up in the air with the velocity of a sky-rocket, whence it descended, tumbling over and over, until it fell at Mrs. Nickleby's feet.

This remarkable appearance was succeeded by another of a precisely similar description; then a fine vegetable marrow, of unusually large dimensions, was seen to whirl aloft, and come toppling down; then, several cucumbers shot up together; and, finally, the air was darkened by a shower of onions, turnip-radishes, and other small vegetables, which fell rolling and scattering, and bumping about, in all directions.

As Kate rose from her seat, in some alarm, and caught her mother's hand to run with her into the

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house, she felt herself rather retarded than assisted in her intention; and following the direction of Mrs. Nickleby's eyes, was quite terrified by the apparition of an old black velvet cap, which, by slow degrees, as if its wearer were ascending a ladder or pair of steps, rose above the wall dividing their garden from that of the next cottage (which, like their own, was a detached building), and was gradually followed by a very large head, and an old face, in which were a pair of most extraordinary gray eyes: very wild, very wide open, and rolling in their sockets, with a dull, languishing, leering look, most ugly to behold.

"Mamma!" cried Kate, really terrified for the moment, "why do you stop, why do you lose an instant? — Mamma, pray come in!"

"Kate, my dear," returned her mother, still holding back, "how can you be so foolish? I'm ashamed of you. How do you suppose you are ever to get through life, if you're such a coward as this? What do you want, sir?" said Mrs. Nickleby, addressing the intruder with a sort of simpering displeasure. "How dare you look into this garden?"

"Queen of my soul," replied the stranger, folding his hands together, "this goblet sip!"

"Nonsense, sir," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Kate, my love, pray be quiet."

"Won't you sip the goblet?" urged the stranger, with his head imploringly on one side, and his right hand on his breast. "Oh, do sip the goblet!"

"I shall not consent to do anything of the kind, sir," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Pray, begone."

"Why is it," said the old gentleman, coming up

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a step higher, and leaning his elbows on the wall with as much complacency as if he were looking out of window, "why is it that beauty is always obdurate, even when admiration is as honorable and respectful as mine?" Here he smiled, kissed his hand, and made several low bows. "Is it owing to the bees, who, when the honey season is over, and they are supposed to have been killed with brimstone, in reality fly to Barbary and lull the captive Moors to sleep with their drowsy songs? Or is it," he added, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, "in consequence of the statue at Charing Cross having been lately seen, on the Stock Exchange at midnight, walking arm in arm with the pump from Aldgate, in a riding-habit?"

"Mamma," murmured Kate, "do you hear him?"

"Hush, my dear!" replied Mrs. Nickleby, in the same tone of voice, "he is very polite, and I think that was a quotation from the poets. Pray, don't worry me so — you'll pinch my arm black and blue. Go away, sir!"

"Quite away?" said the gentleman, with a languishing look. "Oh! quite away?"

"Yes," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "certainly. You have no business here. This is private property, sir; you ought to know that."

"I do know," said the old gentleman, laying his finger on his nose, with an air of familiarity, most reprehensible, "that this is a sacred and enchanted spot, where the most divine charms" — here he kissed his hand and bowed again — "waft mellifluousness over the neighbors' gardens, and force the fruit and vegetables into premature existence.

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That fact I am acquainted with. But will you permit me, fairest creature, to ask you one question, in the absence of the planet Venus, who has gone on business to the Horse Guards, and would otherwise — jealous of your superior charms — interpose between us?"

"Kate," observed Mrs. Nickleby, turning to her daughter, "it's very awkward, positively. I really don't know what to say to this gentleman. One ought to be civil, you know."

"Dear mamma," rejoined Kate, "don't say a word to him, but let us run away as fast as we can, and shut ourselves up till Nicholas comes home."

Mrs. Nickleby looked very grand, not to say contemptuous, at this humiliating proposal; and, turning to the old gentleman, who had watched them during these whispers with absorbing eagerness, said, —

"If you will conduct yourself, sir, like the gentleman I should imagine you to be, from your language and — and — appearance (quite the counterpart of your grandpapa, Kate, my dear, in his best days), and will put your question to me in plain words, I will answer it."

If Mrs. Nickleby's excellent papa had borne, in his best days, a resemblance to the neighbor now looking over the wall, he must have been, to say the least, a very queer-looking old gentleman in his prime. Perhaps Kate thought so, for she ventured to glance at his living portrait with some attention, as he took off his black velvet cap, and, exhibiting a perfectly bald head, made a long series of bows, each accompanied with a fresh kiss of the hand. After exhausting himself, to all appearance, with this fatiguing performance, he covered his

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head once more, pulled the cap very carefully over the tips of his ears, and resuming his former attitude, said, —

"The question is —"

Here he broke off to look round in every direction, and satisfy himself beyond all doubt that there were no listeners near. Assured that there were not, he tapped his nose several times, accompanying the action with a cunning look, as though congratulating himself on his caution; and stretching out his neck, said in a loud whisper, —

"Are you a princess?"

"You are mocking me, sir," replied Mrs. Nickleby, making a feint of retreating towards the house.

"No, but are you?" said the old gentleman.

"You know I am not, sir," replied Mrs. Nickleby.

"Then are you any relation to the Archbishop of Canterbury?" inquired the old gentleman with great anxiety, "or to the Pope of Rome? or the Speaker of the House of Commons? Forgive me, if I am wrong, but I was told you were niece to the Commissioners of Paving, and daughter-in-law to the Lord Mayor and Court of Common Council, which would account for your relationship to all three."

"Whoever has spread such reports, sir," returned Mrs. Nickleby, with some warmth, "has taken great liberties with my name, and one which I am sure my son Nicholas, if he was aware of it, would not allow for an instant. The idea!" said Mrs. Nickleby, drawing herself up, "niece to the Commissioners of Paving!"

"Pray, mamma, come away!" whispered Kate.

"'Pray mamma!' Nonsense, Kate," said Mrs.

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Nickleby angrily, "but that's just the way. If they had said I was niece to a piping bullfinch, what would you care? But I have no sympathy," whimpered Mrs. Nickleby. "I don't expect it, that's one thing."

"Tears!" cried the old gentleman, with such an energetic jump, that he fell down two or three steps and grated his chin against the wall. "Catch the crystal globules — catch 'em — bottle 'em up — cork 'em tight — put sealing-wax on the top — seal 'em with a cupid — label 'em 'Best quality' — and stow 'em away in the fourteen bin, with a bar of iron on the top to keep the thunder off!"

Issuing these commands, as if there were a dozen attendants all actively engaged in their execution, he turned his velvet cap inside out, put it on with great dignity so as to obscure his right eye and three-fourths of his nose, and sticking his arms akimbo, looked very fiercely at a sparrow hard by, till the bird flew away, when he put his cap in his pocket with an air of great satisfaction, and addressed himself with respectful demeanor to Mrs. Nickleby.

"Beautiful madam," such were his words, "if I have made any mistake with regard to your family or connections, I humbly beseech you to pardon me. If I supposed you to be related to Foreign Powers or Native Boards, it is because you have a manner, a carriage, a dignity, which you will excuse my saying that none but yourself (with the single exception perhaps of the tragic muse, when playing extemporaneously on the barrel organ before the East India Company) can parallel. I am not a youth, ma'am, as you see; and although beings like

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you can never grow old, I venture to presume that we are fitted for each other."

"Really, Kate, my love!" said Mrs. Nickleby faintly, and looking another way.

"I have estates, ma'am," said the old gentleman, flourishing his right hand negligently, as if he made very light of such matters, and speaking very fast; "jewels, lighthouses, fish-ponds, a whalery of my own in the North Sea, and several oyster-beds of great profit in the Pacific Ocean. If you will have the kindness to step down to the Royal Exchange and to take the cocked hat off the stoutest beadle's head, you will find my card, in the lining of the crown, wrapped up in a piece of blue paper. My walking-stick is also to be seen on application to the chaplain of the House of Commons, who is strictly forbidden to take any money for showing it. I have enemies about me, ma'am," he looked towards his house and spoke very low, "who attack me on all occasions, and wish to secure my property. If you bless me with your hand and heart, you can apply to the Lord Chancellor or call out the military if necessary — sending my tooth-pick to the commander-in-chief will be sufficient — and so clear the house of them before the ceremony is performed. After that, love bliss and rapture; rapture love and bliss. Be mine, be mine!"

Repeating these last words with great rapture and enthusiasm, the old gentleman put on his black velvet cap again, and looking up into the sky in a hasty manner, said something that was not quite intelligible concerning a balloon he expected, and which was rather after its time.

"Be mine, be mine!" repeated the old gentleman.

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The Gentleman next door declares his passion for Mrs Nickleby

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The Gentleman next door declares his passion for Mrs Nickleby

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"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, "I have hardly the power to speak; but it is necessary for the happiness of all parties that this matter should be set at rest forever."

"Surely there is no necessity for you to say one word, mamma?" reasoned Kate.

"You will allow me, my dear, if you please, to judge for myself," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"Be mine, be mine!" cried the old gentleman.

"It can scarcely be expected, sir," said Mrs. Nickleby, fixing her eyes modestly on the ground, "that I should tell a stranger whether I feel flattered and obliged by such proposals, or not. They certainly are made under very singular circumstances; still at the same time, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent of course" (Mrs. Nickleby's customary qualification), "they must be gratifying and agreeable to one's feelings."

"Be mine, be mine," cried the old gentleman. "Gog and Magog, Gog and Magog. Be mine, be mine!"

"It will be sufficient for me to say, sir," resumed Mrs. Nickleby, with perfect seriousness — "and I'm sure you'll see the propriety of taking an answer and going away — that I have made up my mind to remain a widow, and to devote myself to my children. You may not suppose I am the mother of two children — indeed many people have doubted it, and said that nothing on earth could ever make 'em believe it possible — but it is the case, and they are both grown up. We shall be very glad to have you for a neighbor — very glad; delighted, I'm sure — but in any other character it's quite impossible, quite. As to my being young enough to marry

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again, that perhaps may be so, or it may not be; but I couldn't think of it for an instant, not on any account whatever. I said I never would, and I never will. It's a very painful thing to have to reject proposals, and I would much rather that none were made; at the same time this is the answer that I determined long ago to make, and this is the answer I shall always give."

These observations were partly addressed to the old gentleman, partly to Kate, and partly delivered in soliloquy. Towards their conclusion, the suitor evinced a very irreverent degree of inattention, and Mrs. Nickleby had scarcely finished speaking, when, to the great terror both of that lady and her daughter, he suddenly flung off his coat, and springing on the top of the wall, threw himself into an attitude which displayed his small-clothes and gray worsteds to the fullest advantage, and concluded by standing on one leg, and repeating his favorite bellow with increased vehemence.

While he was still dwelling on the last note, and embellishing it with a prolonged flourish, a dirty hand was observed to glide stealthily and swiftly along the top of the wall, as if in pursuit of a fly, and then to clasp with the utmost dexterity one of the old gentleman's ankles. This done, the companion hand appeared, and clasped the other ankle.

Thus encumbered the old gentleman lifted his legs awkwardly once or twice, as if they were very clumsy and imperfect pieces of machinery, and then looking down on his own side of the wall, burst into a loud laugh.

"It's you, is it?" said the old gentleman.

"Yes, it's me," replied a gruff voice.

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"How's the Emperor of Tartary?" said the old gentleman.

"Oh! he's much the same as usual," was the reply. "No better and no worse."

"The young Prince of China," said the old gentleman, with much interest. "Is he reconciled to his father-in-law, the great potato salesman?"

"No," answered the gruff voice; "and he says he never will be, that's more."

"If that's the case," observed the old gentleman, "perhaps I'd better come down."

"Well," said the man on the other side, "I think you had, perhaps."

One of the hands being then cautiously unclasped, the old gentleman dropped into a sitting posture, and was looking round to smile and bow to Mrs. Nickleby, when he disappeared with some precipitation, as if his legs had been pulled from below.

Very much relieved by his disappearance, Kate was turning to speak to her mamma, when the dirty hands again became visible, and were immediately followed by the figure of a coarse squat man, who ascended by the steps which had been recently occupied by their singular neighbor.

"Beg your pardon, ladies," said this new-comer, grinning and touching his hat. "Has he been making love to either of you?"

"Yes," said Kate.

"Ah!" rejoined the man, taking his handkerchief out of his hat and wiping his face, "he always will, you know. Nothing will prevent his making love."

"I need not ask you if he is out of his mind, poor creature," said Kate.

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"Why, no," replied the man, looking into his hat, throwing his handkerchief in at one dab, and putting it on again. "That's pretty plain, that is."

"Has he been long so?" asked Kate.

"A long while."

"And is there no hope for him?" said Kate compassionately.

"Not a bit, and don't deserve to be," replied the keeper. "He's a deal pleasanter without his senses than with 'em. He was the cruellest, wickedest, out-and-outerest old flint that ever drawed breath."

"Indeed!" said Kate.

"By George!" replied the keeper, shaking his head so emphatically that he was obliged to frown to keep his hat on. "I never come across such a vagabond, and my mate says the same. Broke his poor wife's heart, turned his daughters out of doors, drove his sons into the streets — it was a blessing he went mad at last, through evil tempers, and covetousness, and selfishness, and guzzling, and drinking, or he'd have drove many others so. Hope for *him*, an old rip! There isn't too much hope going, but I'll bet a crown that what there is, is saved for more deserving chaps than him, anyhow."

With which confession of his faith, the keeper shook his head again, as much as to say that nothing short of this would do, if things were to go on at all; and touching his hat sulkily — not that he was in an ill-humor, but that his subject ruffled him — descended the ladder, and took it away.

During this conversation, Mrs. Nickleby had regarded the man with a severe and steadfast look. She now heaved a profound sigh, and pursing up her lips, shook her head in a slow and doubtful manner.

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"Poor creature!" said Kate.

"Ah! poor indeed!" rejoined Mrs. Nickleby. "It's shameful that such things should be allowed — shameful!"

"How can they be helped, mamma?" said Kate mournfully. "The infirmities of nature —"

"Nature!" said Mrs. Nickleby. "What! Do *you* suppose this poor gentleman is out of his mind?"

"Can anybody who sees him entertain any other opinion, mamma?"

"Why, then, I just tell you this, Kate," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "that he is nothing of the kind, and I am surprised you can be so imposed upon. It's some plot of these people to possess themselves of his property — didn't he say so himself? He may be a little odd and flighty, perhaps, many of us are that; but downright mad! and express himself as he does, respectfully, and in quite poetical language, and making offers with so much thought, and care, and prudence — not as if he ran into the streets, and went down upon his knees to the first chit of a girl he met, as a madman would! No, no, Kate, there's a great deal too much method in *his* madness; depend upon that, my dear."

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CHAPTER XXI.

ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE CONVIVIAL SENTIMENT, THAT THE BEST OF FRIENDS MUST SOMETIMES PART.

THE pavement of Snow Hill had been baking and frying all day in the heat, and the twain Saracens' heads guarding the entrance to the hostelry of whose name and sign they are the duplicate presentments, looked — or seemed, in the eyes of jaded and foot-sore passers-by, to look — more vicious than usual, after blistering and scorching in the sun, when, in one of the inn's smallest sitting-rooms, through whose open window there rose, in a palpable steam, wholesome exhalations from reeking coach-horses, the usual furniture of a tea-table was displayed in neat and inviting order, flanked by large joints of roast and boiled, a tongue, a pigeon-pie, a cold fowl, a tankard of ale, and other little matters of the like kind, which, in degenerate towns and cities, are generally understood to belong more particularly to solid lunches, stage-coach dinners, or unusually substantial breakfasts.

Mr. John Browdie, with his hands in his pockets, hovered restlessly about these delicacies, stopping occasionally to whisk the flies out of the sugar-basin with his wife's pocket-handkerchief, or to dip a tea-

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spoon in the milk-pot and carry it to his mouth, or to cut off a little knob of crust, and a little corner of meat, and swallow them at two gulps like a couple of pills. After every one of these flirtations with the eatables, he pulled out his watch, and declared with an earnestness quite pathetic that he couldn't undertake to hold out two minutes longer.

"Tilly!" said John to his lady, who was reclining half awake and half asleep upon a sofa.

"Well, John!"

"Weel, John!" retorted her husband impatiently. "Dost thou feel hoongry, lass?"

"Not very," said Mrs. Browdie.

"Not vary!" repeated John, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Hear her say not vary, and us dining at three, and loonching off pasthry thot aggravates a mon 'stead of pacifying him! Not vary!"

"Here's a gen'l'man for you, sir," said the waiter, looking in.

"A wa'at for me?" cried John, as though he thought it must be a letter, or a parcel.

"A gen'l'man, sir."

"Stars and garthers, chap!" said John, "wa'at dost thou coom and say thot for? In wi' 'un."

"Are you at home, sir?"

"At whoam!" cried John, "I wish I wur; I'd ha tea'd two hour ago. Why, I told t'oother chap to look sharp ootside door, and tell 'un d'rectly he coom, thot we war faint wi' hoonger. In wi' 'un. Aha! Thee hond, Misther Nickleby. This is nigh to be the proodest day o' my life, sir. Hoo be all wi' ye? Ding! But, I'm glod o' this!"

Quite forgetting even his hunger in the heartiness of his salutation, John Browdie shook Nicholas by

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the hand again and again, slapping his palm with great violence between each shake, to add warmth to the reception.

"Ah! there she be," said John, observing the look which Nicholas directed towards his wife. "There she be — we sha'n't quarrel about her noo — eh? Ecod, when I think o' thot — but thou want'st soom'at to eat. Fall to, mun, fall to, and for wa'at we're aboot to receive —"

No doubt the grace was properly finished, but nothing more was heard, for John had already begun to play such a knife and fork, that his speech was, for the time, gone.

"I shall take the usual license, Mr. Browdie," said Nicholas, as he placed a chair for the bride.

"Tak' whatever thou like'st," said John, "and when a's gane, ca' for more."

Without stopping to explain, Nicholas kissed the blushing Mrs. Browdie, and handed her to her seat.

"I say," said John, rather astounded for the moment, "mak' theeself quite at whoam, will 'ee?"

"You may depend upon that," replied Nicholas; "on one condition."

"And wa'at may thot be?" asked John.

"That you make me a godfather the very first time you have occasion for one."

"Eh! d'ye hear thot?" cried John, laying down his knife and fork. "A godfeyther! Ha! ha! ha! Tilly — hear till 'un — a godfeyther! Divn't say a word more, ye'll never beat thot. Occasion for 'un — a godfeyther! Ha! ha! ha!"

Never was man so tickled with a respectable old joke, as John Browdie was with this. He chuckled, roared, half suffocated himself by laughing large

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pieces of beef into his windpipe, roared again, persisted in eating at the same time, got red in the face and black in the forehead, coughed, cried, got better, went off again laughing inwardly, got worse, choked, had his back thumped, stamped about, frightened his wife, and at last recovered in a state of the last exhaustion and with the water streaming from his eyes, but still faintly ejaculating, "A godfeyther—a godfeyther, Tilly!" in a tone bespeaking an exquisite relish of the sally, which no suffering could diminish.

"You remember the night of our first tea-drinking?" said Nicholas.

"Shall I e'er forget it, mun?" replied John Browdie.

"He was a desperate fellow that night, though, was he not, Mrs. Browdie?" said Nicholas. "Quite a monster!"

"If you had only heard him as we were going home, Mr. Nickleby, you'd have said so indeed," returned the bride. "I never was so frightened in all my life."

"Coom, coom," said John, with a broad grin; "thou know'st betther than thot, Tilly."

"So I was," replied Mrs. Browdie. "I almost made up my mind never to speak to you again."

"A'most!" said John, with a broader grin than the last. "A'most made up her mind! And she wur coaxin', and coaxin', and wheedlin', and wheedlin' a' the blessed wa'. 'Wa'at didst thou let yon chap mak' oop tiv'ee for?' says I. 'I deedn't, John,' says she, a-squeedgin my arm. 'You deedn't?' says I. 'Noa,' says she, a-squeedgin of me agean."

"Lor, John!" interposed his pretty wife, color-

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ing very much. "How can you talk such nonsense? As if I should have dreamt of such a thing!"

"I dinnot know whether thou'd ever dreamt of it, though I think that's loike eneaf, mind," retorted John; "but thou didst it. 'Ye're a feeckle, changeable weathercock, lass,' says I. 'Not feeckle, John,' says she. 'Yes,' says I, 'feeckle, dom'd feeckle. Dinnot tell me thou bean't, efther yon chap at schoolmeasther's,' says I. 'Him!' says she, quite screeching. 'Ah! him!' says I. 'Why, John,' says she — and she coom a deal closer and squeedged a deal harder than she'd deane afore — 'dost thou think it's nat'ral noo, that having such a proper mun as thou to keep company wi', I'd ever tak' oop wi' such a leetle scanty whipper-snapper as yon?' she says. Ha! ha! ha! She said whipper-snapper! 'Ecod!' I says, 'efther thot, neame the day, and let's have it ower!' Ha! ha! ha!"

Nicholas laughed very heartily at this story, both on account of its telling against himself, and his being desirous to spare the blushes of Mrs. Browdie, whose protestations were drowned in peals of laughter from her husband. His good-nature soon put her at her ease; and although she still denied the charge, she laughed so heartily at it, that Nicholas had the satisfaction of feeling assured that in all essential respects it was strictly true.

"This is the second time," said Nicholas, "that we have ever taken a meal together, and only the third I have ever seen you; and yet it really seems to me as if I were among old friends."

"Weel!" observed the Yorkshireman, "so I say."

"And I am sure I do," added his young wife.

"I have the best reason to be impressed with the

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feeling, mind," said Nicholas; "for if it had not been for your kindness of heart, my good friend, when I had no right or reason to expect it, I know not what might have become of me or what plight I should have been in by this time."

"Talk aboot some'at else," replied John gruffly, "and dinnot bother."

"It must be a new song to the same tune, then," said Nicholas, smiling. "I told you in my letter that I deeply felt and admired your sympathy with that poor lad, whom you released at the risk of involving yourself in trouble and difficulty; but I can never tell you how grateful he and I, and others whom you don't know, are to you for taking pity on him."

"Ecod!" rejoined John Browdie, drawing up his chair; "and I can never tell *you* hoo gratful soom folks that we do know would be loikewise, if *they* know'd I had takken pity on him."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Browdie, "what a state I was in that night!"

"Were they at all disposed to give you credit for assisting in the escape?" inquired Nicholas of John Browdie.

"Not a bit," replied the Yorkshireman, extending his mouth from ear to ear. "There I lay, snoog in schoolmeasther's bed long efther it was dark, and nobody coom nigh the pleace. 'Weel!' thinks I, 'he's got a pretty good start, and if he bean't whoam by noo, he never will be; so you may coom as quick as you loike, and foind us reddy'—that is, you know, schoolmeasther might coom."

"I understand," said Nicholas.

"Presently," resumed John, "he *did* coom. I

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heerd door shut doonstairs, and him a-warking oop in the daark. 'Slow and steddy,' I says to myself, 'tak' your time, sir — no hurry.' He cooms to the door, turns the key — turns the key when there warn't nothing to hoold the lock — and ca's oot 'Hallo, there!' 'Yes,' thinks I, 'you may do thot agean, and not wakken anybody, sir.' 'Hallo, there,' he says, and then he stops. 'Thou'd betther not aggravate me,' says schoolmeasther, efther a little time. 'I'll brak' every boan in your boddy, Smike,' he says, efther another little time. Then all of a soodden, he sings oot for a loight, and when it cooms — ecod, such a hoorly-boorly! 'Wa'at's the matter?' says I. 'He's gane,' says he, — stark mad wi' vengeance. 'Have you heerd nought?' 'Ees,' says I, 'I heerd street-door shut, no time at a' ago. I heerd a person run doon there' (pointing t'other wa' — eh?) 'Help!' he cries. 'I'll help you,' says I; and off we set — the wrong wa'! Ho! ho! ho!"

"Did you go far?" asked Nicholas.

"Far!" replied John; "I run him clean off his legs in quarther of an hoor. To see old schoolmeasther wi'out his hat, skimming along oop to his knees in mud and wather, tumbling over fences, and rowling into ditches, and bawling oot like mad, wi' his one eye looking sharp out for the lad, and his coat-tails flying out behind, and him spattered wi' mud all ower, face and all! I tho't I should ha' dropped doon, and killed myself wi' laughing."

John laughed so heartily at the mere recollection, that he communicated the contagion to both his hearers, and all three burst into peals of laughter, which were renewed again and again, until they could laugh no longer.

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"He's a bad 'un," said John, wiping his eyes; "a very bad 'un is schoolmeasther."

"I can't bear the sight of him, John," said his wife.

"Coom," retorted John, "thot's tidy in you, thot is. If it wa'nt along o' you, we shouldn't know nought aboot 'un. Thou know'd 'un first, Tilly, didn't thou?"

"I couldn't help knowing Fanny Squeers, John," returned his wife; "she was an old playmate of mine, you know."

"Weel," replied John, "dean't I say so, lass? It's best to be neighborly, and keep up old acquaintance loike; and what I say is, dean't quarrel if 'ee can help it. Dinnot think so, Mr. Nickleby?"

"Certainly," returned Nicholas; "and you acted upon that principle when I met you on horseback on the road, after our memorable evening."

"Sure-ly," said John. "Wa'at I say, I stick by."

"And that's a fine thing to do, and manly too," said Nicholas, "though it's not exactly what we understand by 'coming Yorkshire over us' in London. Miss Squeers is stopping with you, you said in your note."

"Yes," replied John, "Tilly's bridesmaid; and a queer bridesmaid she be, too. She wean't be a bride in a hurry, I reckon."

"For shame, John," said Mrs. Browdie; with an acute perception of the joke, though, being a bride herself.

"The groom will be a blessed mun," said John, his eyes twinkling at the idea. "He'll be in luck, he will."

"You see, Mr. Nickleby," said his wife, "that it

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was in consequence of her being here, that John wrote to you and fixed to-night, because we thought that it wouldn't be pleasant for you to meet, after what has passed —"

"Unquestionably. You were quite right in that," said Nicholas, interrupting.

"Especially," observed Mrs. Browdie, looking very sly, "after what we know about past and gone love matters."

"We know, indeed!" said Nicholas, shaking his head. "You behaved rather wickedly there, I suspect."

"O' course she did," said John Browdie, passing his huge forefinger through one of his wife's pretty ringlets, and looking very proud of her. "She wur always as skittish and full o' tricks as a —"

"Well, as a what?" said his wife.

"As a woman," returned John. "Ding! But I dinnot know aught else that cooms near it."

"You were speaking about Miss Squeers," said Nicholas, with the view of stopping some slight connubialities which had begun to pass between Mr. and Mrs. Browdie, and which rendered the position of a third party in some degree embarrassing, as occasioning him to feel rather in the way than otherwise.

"Oh, yes," rejoined Mrs. Browdie. "John, ha' done — John fixed to-night, because she had settled that she would go and drink tea with her father. And to make quite sure of there being nothing amiss, and of your being quite alone with us, he settled to go out there and fetch her home."

"That was a very good arrangement," said Nicholas, "though I am sorry to be the occasion of so much trouble."

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"Not the least in the world," returned Mrs. Browdie; "for we have looked forward to see you — John and I have — with the greatest possible pleasure. Do you know, Mr. Nickleby," said Mrs. Browdie, with her archest smile, "that I really think Fanny Squeers was very fond of you?"

"I am very much obliged to her," said Nicholas; "but upon my word, I never aspired to making any impression upon her virgin heart."

"How you talk!" tittered Mrs. Browdie. "No, but do you know that really — seriously now and without any joking — I was given to understand by Fanny herself, that you had made an offer to her, and that you two were going to be engaged quite solemn and regular."

"Was you, ma'am — was you?" cried a shrill female voice, "was you given to understand that I — I — was going to be engaged to an assassinating thief that shed the gore of my pa? Do you — do you think, ma'am — that I was very fond of such dirt beneath my feet, as I couldn't condescend to touch with kitchen tongs, without blacking and crocking myself by the contract? Do you, ma'am — do you? Oh! base and degrading 'Tilda!"

With these reproaches Miss Squeers flung the door wide open, and disclosed to the eyes of the astonished Browdies and Nicholas, not only her own symmetrical form, arrayed in the chaste white garments before described (a little dirtier), but the form of her brother and father, the pair of Wackfords.

"This is the hend, is it?" continued Miss Squeers, who, being excited, aspirated her h's strongly; "this is the hend, is it, of all my for-

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bearance and friendship for that double-faced thing — that viper, that — that — mermaid?" (Miss Squeers hesitated a long time for this last epithet, and brought it out triumphantly at last, as if it quite clinched the business.) "This is the hend, is it, of all my bearing with her deceitfulness, her lowness, her falseness, her laying herself out to catch the admiration of vulgar minds, in a way which made me blush for my — for my —"

"Gender," suggested Mr. Squeers, regarding the spectators with a malevolent eye — literally *a* malevolent eye.

"Yes," said Miss Squeers; "but I thank my stars that my ma is of the same —"

"Hear, hear!" remarked Mr. Squeers; "and I wish she was here to have a scratch at this company."

"This is the hend, is it," said Miss Squeers, tossing her head, and looking contemptuously at the floor, "of my taking notice of that rubbishing creature, and demeaning myself to patronize her?"

"Oh, come," rejoined Mrs. Browdie, disregarding all the endeavors of her spouse to restrain her, and forcing herself into a front row, "don't talk such nonsense as that."

"Have I not patronized you, ma'am?" demanded Miss Squeers.

"No," returned Mrs. Browdie.

"I will not look for blushes in such a quarter," said Miss Squeers haughtily, "for that countenance is a stranger to everything but hignominiousness and red-faced boldness."

"I say," interposed John Browdie, nettled by these accumulated attacks on his wife, "dra' it mild, dra' it mild."

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"You, Mr. Browdie," said Miss Squeers, taking him up very quickly, "I pity. I have no feeling for you, sir, but one of unliquidated pity."

"Oh!" said John.

"No," said Miss Squeers, looking sideways at her parent, "although I *am* a queer bridesmaid, and *sha'n't* be a bride in a hurry, and although my husband *will* be in luck, I entertain no sentiments towards you, sir, but sentiments of pity."

Here Miss Squeers looked sideways at her father again, who looked sideways at her, as much as to say, "There you had him."

"*I* know what you've got to go through," said Miss Squeers, shaking her curls violently. "*I* know what life is before you, and if you was my bitterest and deadliest enemy, I could wish you nothing worse."

"Couldn't you wish to be married to him yourself, if that was the case?" inquired Mrs. Browdie, with great suavity of manner.

"Oh, ma'am, how witty you are," retorted Miss Squeers with a low courtesy, "almost as witty, ma'am, as you are clever. How very clever it was in you, ma'am, to choose a time when I had gone to tea with my pa, and was sure not to come back without being fetched! What a pity you never thought that other people might be as clever as yourself and spoil your plans!"

"You won't vex me, child, with such airs as these," said the late Miss Price, assuming the matron.

"Don't *Missis* me, ma'am, if you please," returned Miss Squeers, sharply. "I'll not bear it. Is *this* the hend —"

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"Dang it a'," cried John Browdie impatiently. "Say thee say out, Fanny, and mak' sure it's the end, and dinnot ask nobody whether it is or not."

"Thanking you for your advice which was not required, Mr. Browdie," returned Miss Squeers, with laborious politeness, "have the goodness not to presume to meddle with my Christian name. Even my pity shall never make me forget what's due to myself, Mr. Browdie. 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, with such a sudden accession of violence that John started in his boots, "I throw you off forever, miss. I abandon you. I renounce you. I wouldn't," cried Miss Squeers in a solemn voice, "have a child named 'Tilda — not to save it from its grave."

"As for the matther o' that," observed John, "it'll be time eneaf to think aboot neaming of it when it cooms."

"John!" interposed his wife, "don't tease her."

"Oh! Tease, indeed!" cried Miss Squeers, bridling up. "Tease, indeed! He, he! Tease, too! No, don't tease her. Consider her feelings, pray!"

"If it's fated that listeners are never to hear any good of themselves," said Mrs. Browdie, "I can't help it, and I am very sorry for it. But I will say, Fanny, that times out of number I have spoken so kindly of you behind your back, that even you could have found no fault with what I said."

"Oh, I dare say not, ma'am!" cried Miss Squeers, with another courtesy. "Best thanks to you for your goodness, and begging and praying you not to be hard upon me another time!"

"I don't know," resumed Mrs. Browdie, "that I have said anything very bad of you, even now — at all events, what I did say was quite true; but if I

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have, I am very sorry for it, and I beg your pardon. You have said much worse of me, scores of times, Fanny; but I have never borne any malice to you, and I hope you'll not bear any to me."

Miss Squeers made no more direct reply than surveying her former friend from top to toe, and elevating her nose in the air with ineffable disdain. But some indistinct allusions to a "puss," and a "minx," and a "contemptible creature," escaped her; and this, together with a severe biting of the lips, great difficulty in swallowing, and very frequent comings and goings of breath, seemed to imply that feelings were swelling in Miss Squeers's bosom too great for utterance.

While the foregoing conversation was proceeding, Master Wackford, finding himself unnoticed, and feeling his preponderating inclinations strong upon him, had by little and little sidled up to the table and attacked the food with such slight skirmishing as drawing his fingers round and round the inside of the plates, and afterwards sucking them with infinite relish — picking the bread, and dragging the pieces over the surface of the butter — pocketing lumps of sugar, pretending all the time to be absorbed in thought — and so forth. Finding that no interference was attempted with these small liberties, he gradually mounted to greater, and, after helping himself to a moderately good cold collation, was, by this time, deep in the pie.

Nothing of this had been unobserved by Mr. Squeers, who, so long as the attention of the company was fixed upon other objects, hugged himself to think that his son and heir should be fattening at the enemy's expense. But there being now an

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appearance of a temporary calm, in which the proceedings of little Wackford could scarcely fail to be observed, he feigned to be aware of the circumstance for the first time, and inflicted upon the face of that young gentleman a slap that made the very teacups ring.

"Eating!" cried Mr. Squeers, "of what his father's enemies has left! It's fit to go and poison you, you unnat'ral boy."

"It wean't hurt him," said John, apparently very much relieved by the prospect of having a man in the quarrel; "let 'un eat. I wish the whole school was here. I'd give 'em soom'at to stay their unfort'nate stomachs wi', if I spent the last penny I had!"

Squeers scowled at him with the worst and most malicious expression of which his face was capable —it was a face of remarkable capability, too, in that way — and shook his fist stealthily.

"Coom, coom, schoolmeasther," said John, "dinnot make a fool o' thyself; for if I was to sheake mine — only once — thou'd fa' doon wi' the wind o' it."

"It was you, was it," returned Squeers, "that helped off my runaway boy? It was you, was it?"

"Me!" returned John, in a loud tone. "Yes, it wa' me, coom; wa'at o' that? It wa' me. Noo then!"

"You hear him say he did it, my child!" said Squeers, appealing to his daughter. "You hear him say he did it!"

"Did it!" cried John. "I'll tell 'ee more; hear this, too. If thou'd got another roonaway boy, I'd do it agean. If thou'd got twonty roonaway boys,

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I'd do it twonty times ower, and twonty more to thot; and I tell thee more," said John, "noo my blood is oop, that thou'rt an old ra'ascal; and that it's weel for thou, thou be'est an old 'un, or I'd ha' poonded thee to flour, when thou told an honest mun hoo thou'd licked that poor chap in t' coorch."

"An honest man!" cried Squeers, with a sneer.

"Ah! an honest man," replied John; "honest in aught but ever putting legs under seame table wi' such as thou."

"Scandal!" said Squeers exultingly. "Two witnesses to it; Wackford knows the nature of an oath, he does — we shall have you there, sir. Rascal, eh?" Mr. Squeers took out his pocket-book and made a note of it. "Very good. I should say that was worth full twenty pound at the next assizes, without the honesty, sir."

"'Soizes," cried John, "thou'd betther not talk to me o' 'Soizes. Yorkshire schools have been shown up at 'Soizes afore noo, mun, and it's a ticklish soobjact to revive, I can tell ye."

Mr. Squeers shook his head in a threatening manner, looking very white with passion; and taking his daughter's arm, and dragging little Wackford by the hand, retreated towards the door.

"As for you," said Squeers, turning round and addressing Nicholas, who, as he had caused him to smart pretty soundly on a former occasion, purposely abstained from taking any part in the discussion, "see if I ain't down upon you before long. You'll go a-kidnapping of boys, will you? Take care their fathers don't turn up — mark that — take care their fathers don't turn up, and send 'em back to me to do as I like with, in spite of you."

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"I am not afraid of that," replied Nicholas, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously, and turning away.

"Ain't you!" retorted Squeers, with a diabolical look. "Now, then, come along."

"I leave such society, with my pa, for ever," said Miss Squeers, looking contemptuously and loftily round. "I am defiled by breathing the air with such creatures. Poor Mr. Browdie! He! he! he! I do pity him, that I do; he's so deluded. He! he! he!—Artful and designing 'Tilda!"

With this sudden relapse into the sternest and most majestic wrath, Miss Squeers swept from the room; and having sustained her dignity until the last possible moment, was heard to sob and scream and struggle in the passage.

John Browdie remained standing behind the table, looking from his wife to Nicholas, and back again, with his mouth wide open, until his hand accidentally fell upon the tankard of ale, when he took it up, and having obscured his features therewith for some time, drew a long breath, handed it over to Nicholas, and rang the bell.

"Here, waither," said John briskly. "Look alive here. Tak' these things awa', and let's have soomat broiled for sooper—vary comfortable and plenty o' it—at ten o'clock. Bring soom brandy and soom wather, and a pair o' slippers—the largest pair in the house—and be quick aboot it. Dash ma wig!" said John, rubbing his hands, "there's no ganging oot to-neeght, noo, to fetch anybody whoam, and, ecod, we'll begin to spend the evening in airnest."

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